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By THOMAS THOMPSON 76

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CALIFORNIA—SINK OR SWIM!

By L. C. Davis

NOT all who journeyed to the gold fields of California in the years of 1849, '50 and '51 went the overland route across the trackless western plains. Thousands chose the 15,000-mile jaunt by sea around Cape Horn.

During the month of January, 1849, ninety ships departed from Atlantic seaports, bound for California, and seventy others were making ready to leave. One brig in New York harbor sold out its reservations—thirty cabin berths and seventy bunks—three hours after announcing its sailing date. During the first year of the Gold Rush 500 ships sailed from Atlantic and Gulf ports. Many of these were reconditioned old tubs.

Fares for the long roundabout way ranged from $250 for below-the-decks bunks to $400 for choice cabin berths. But this was only part of the expense. Clothes and outfits for each passenger ran into additional dollars and, of course, it was wise to land in California with a little money with which to start prospecting. Many handbooks of advice were published at that time, and one advised a minimum cash outlay of $750 for the trip. Some got by on $600, while others spent twice that much getting there.

Many of the voyagers were "landlubbers" and suffered seasickness when only a few days out. By that time they entered the tropics and the quarters below decks became unbearable. The farther they got the worse the food and water got, and the latter—by this time brackish—had to be rationed. Frequent arguments over the

(Please turn to page 8)

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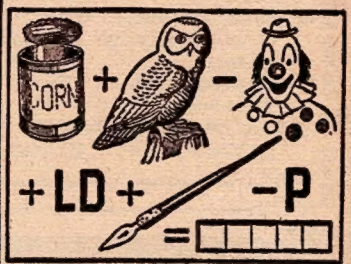
The solution to the sample puzzle below is the name of a Pilgrim Father.



How To Solve This Sample Puzzle

First of all, note that there are a CAN, OWL, CLOWN and PEN in this puzzle. To solve it, write down CAN. Next add OWL, giving you CANOWL. Next, subtract CLOWN, which leaves you with A. Then add LD, giving you ALD. Next, add PEN, giving you ALDPEN. Subtract P, leaving you with the solution ALDEN.

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With the free book and the first Puzzle-Quiz will come a postcard which we ask you to return. On it you can check off "YES"—that you want to stay in the contest and get the other volumes. Or you can check off "No"—that you do *not* want to stay in the contest, or get any other volumes.

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California—Sink or Swim!

(Continued from page 6)

food's poor quality developed between passengers and ship's officers.

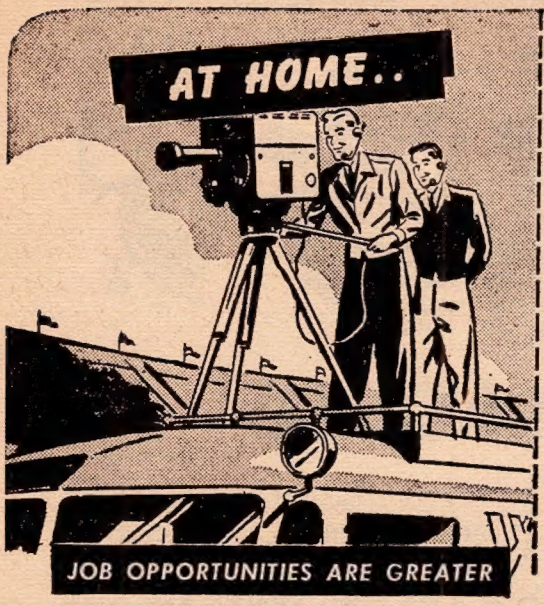
The voyage consumed six months and the long days of enforced idleness told heavily on the emigrants. To while away the time many resorted to practical jokes on fellow passengers, such as pails of water suspended over doorways, emetics in food, ropes tied to chairs that were jerked from beneath unsuspecting victims, and make-believe pirate attacks. It was one way to keep from going stark, raving mad.

As if the tropical heat wasn't enough, they had to endure the terrible Antarctic cold in the sweep around the Horn. The diary of one passenger told of the captain having to come off the bridge and thaw the ice out of his beard over the galley stove. If the ship didn't crack up on the treacherous Cape rocks they were lucky.

However, not all went the full sea route of fifteen thousand miles, but disembarked at Panama and crossed the Isthmus to the Pacific side, where they boarded another ship for Frisco. Only fifty miles across as the crow flies, it was sixty by river and trail and was a five-day trip.

Beginning at the port of Chagres on the Atlantic side, emigrants would travel by canoe for forty miles up the Chagres river—broad and slow-moving at the mouth, but swift and narrow by the time they reached Cruces, at which place they changed to another mode of transportation. The remaining twenty miles over the mountains to Panama City was made by foot or horseback. It was a rugged trip in spite of its time and distance-saving advantages, both physically and financially.

Of the many thousands who went to the gold fields less than five per cent got back home as well off as when they left. Some struck it rich, however, while others stayed and succeeded in business.



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IN THE SADDLE

A SOLDIER'S life is a bitter one. It's isolation, discipline, drill, kitchen police and the guard house during training. It's filth, slime, blood, disease and death when the chips go down in action.

"You'll get no thanks," whispers the ghost at the soldier's side when the machine guns stutter and the mortars *clump*.

"Sucker, there's others back home who should be here—but aren't," sneers the ghost when the artillery stills and the deadly silence falls.

"Quit, you fool! Life's good!" snarls the specter when Death's hornets hum and the fires from hell lash out. "Quit," whispers the ghost. "Quit! No one will even remember you. . . ."

But the soldier, like so many who fought in the Korean war, shrugs and fights on. Fights on like the Western pioneer breaking trail and clearing living space in the wilderness. Like the old-time cowmen licking and cursing and fighting their herds to railhead. Like the giants who moved the railroads' iron horses over steel through hell and damnation. Like the old army before him.

Does the soldier get thanks? From some.

Reward? Maybe.

Remembrance? Shall we let Author John Sims tell us a little story. . . .

IT WASN'T much of a patrol. About a dozen men under a be-mustached young lieutenant, clanking dustily down a dry desert canyon. The year: about the late '60's early '70's.

They rode warily, eyes watching uneasily the rocky cliffs on each side. The only sign of other life might have been a buzzard or two sailing in lazy circles and perhaps seeing the dark, turbaned warriors of Cochise who lay like lizards; motionless, their bodies blending with the rocks where they lay waiting.

For Cochise, the deadly Chiricahua Apache military genius, was in the midst of his bloody eight year reign of terror against the whites; all because another young lieutenant, Bascomb—fresh out of West Point and over ambitious for promotion—had arrested him under a flag of truce, shot him as he escaped, and then hanged Cochise's brother, son, and four others.

The patrol clanked on. Their job, like most of the other patrols, was to watch all water holes, catch their quarry, run them down and kill every one of them.

Ahead, the canyon walls rose a bit higher and narrowed in. The patrol trotted on, and upon one of the bluffs, among the rocks, something stirred. Then came the crash of rifles. From all sides

(Please turn to page 12)

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(Continued from page 10)

the smooth bores, the stolen Army Springfields, and the arrows came pouring down. Horses began to lunge and scream as they fell kicking. Riders tried to get in among the rocks for protection, tried to fire at what they could not see. Gray powder smoke from black powder roiled up from points among the rocks and hung lazily.

It was over in a matter of minutes. Quiet descended over the canyon where thirteen bodies in blue lay in grotesque positions. Then the rocks which had displayed no signs of life came alive with scrambling figures pouring into the canyon floor; black-visaged warriors wearing colored turbans and with fierce white streaks painted across the nose and under the eyes. Lithe men in old shirts, breech clouts, and white doe skin leggins to the knees.

They swarmed in and went to work, slashing with lances, bending with knives to cut the throats of men already dead. Stabbing, shooting, yelling gleefully, tearing away clothes, fighting over rifles and ammunition belts and pistols.

Then they were gone like shadows, fading back into the desert from which they had whipped every other tribe and made themselves Apaches—enemies—of every other living human being on earth.

In the canyon the mutilated bodies lay beside the carcasses of their dead horses. The buzzards might have waited, perhaps not. It is certain that the commanding officer of a now long-abandoned Army post waited and then sent out a search party.

A soldier by tradition is entitled to have *Taps* blown over his grave. Whether or not the men—ranchers perhaps—who buried the thirteen blew *Taps* over the graves will never be known.

But a few months ago some Mexican woodcutters, coming home one afternoon from farther up the canyon, discovered thirteen graves along a brushy hillside. Very old graves of long, long ago. They reported their find to the rancher for whom they were working. Not the graves of *Indios,* they said. The Apaches buried their dead so that the whites could not find them.

There were no records of any white massacre, but some of the very old ranchers remembered the death of thirteen soldiers from stories told by their fathers and mothers. No, they didn't remember the names. Just thirteen soldiers.

Word got around about the discovery and finally reached the American Legion Post in Douglas, Arizona. The graves of thirteen soldiers. And on the following Sunday two cars left town and drove to the spot. While the color guard stood at "Present Arms," with the American and the Legion flags between the two rifles, a Legion bugler blew *Taps* over the thirteen graves. The notes floated clear and sweet down the canyon which once had resounded to the crash of Apache rifles.

The last note died away, and then from down the canyon came the soft "echo" from another bugler.

After more than seventy years thirteen cavalrymen who fought and died under their flag received its final tribute.

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The Wrath and the Wind is as cruel as sin, brutal as the plague of which Maury is the agent, solacing as late-found love and forgiveness. Alexander Key has the Gulf Coast and the sea in his blood. His writing creates an unforgettable atmosphere as remarkable as his portrayal of intense action and dramatic suspense.

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BURN 'EM OUT!

Jesse Morgan figured there were some things even Connell's power and money couldn't buy, among them being a two-bit, Iron Mountain cowman named Morgan.

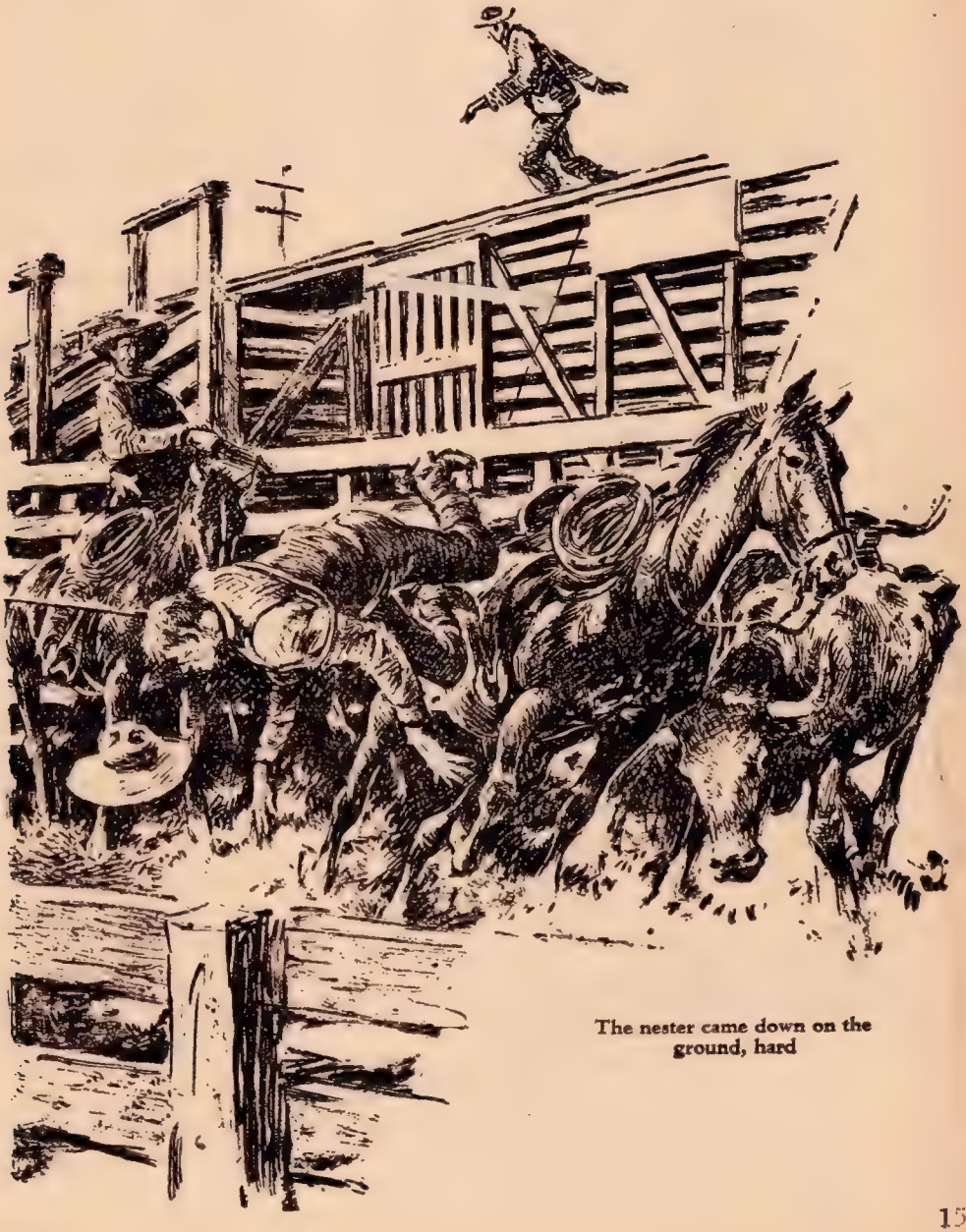
CHAPTER ONE

The Nester Killer

MORGAN stood on the platform of the caboose as the train slowed at Iron Mountain siding. A large, rough-appearing man in a black coat, overall pants and brown Stetson, he gripped a cigar in his teeth and gazed out along the yellow meadows running back to pine-dark ridges. He saw the big, dripping water tank and the little

four-six-oh laboring up under it with alkali crusting her boiler jacket.

His eye appraised the cattle in the siding pens. They were not quite so gaunt as razorback hogs, nor so fat as dairy cattle. They were seventy-odd run-of-the-mill cows ready for shipping. A horseman behind the pens waved a gloved hand at Jesse Morgan. Morgan waved back to Walt Spender and looked for the dark hair of the nester's sister. He saw her warming her hands at a small fire.



The nester came down on the ground, hard

She waved, and Morgan sighed and waved back.

The last wave I'll have from her, thought Morgan.

He let himself down and walked along the grade, stretching his legs. He had the stiffness of a hundred and seventy-five miles in him, having ridden down from The Dalles with the empties and a carload of supplies for Anvil, which he ramrodded for Holt Connell. Walt Spender, a big, horsey man with long yellow teeth and a red face, came up to him, striking his gloved hands together.

"Take a look," he said. "First shipment of T-Bar cattle since the brand was recorded!"

Morgan looked. He spat, and replaced the cigar in his mouth. "Logan and Dudley got their cattle in here, too?"

"And feeders waiting for all our stuff in Montana!"

Morgan went behind the pens with him. Two other men came up, old Jake Dudley and Curly Logan. Morgan acknowledged them. He was aware of Laura Spender coming from the fire. He heard the grating of rusted iron as the trainmen swung the spout out over the locomotive. Then, just at the moment when he thought he could give them the news, he heard himself saying, "You'd better team up on a grain pasture before winter. That swamp grass looks rich as rhubarb but it hasn't got the tallow in it. This is a bunch of dogs, if I ever saw any."

"Fixing to," said Jake Dudley enthusiastically. He was an old timer with a neck like a turkey buzzard rising from a collarless neckband shirt. His chaps were patched with copper wire and the way his eyelids drooped always made Jesse think of a sheepdog.

Laura put her foot up on the lower rail of the pen. Morgan realized she was regarding him with more discernment than the men. She was sharper than any of them; on the occasions when he had ridden by their new yellow-pine cabins to drop a word of advice or ask them to dig a few post-holes for day wages, she always had questions to ask. It was the end of their first summer in this newly-opened Indian land off Holt Connell's big Anvil ranch; they were all so low, he knew, that they were saving burnt matches for fuel.

"Did you find out about the price of timothy?" Laura asked.

"Fourteen dollars," said Morgan.

"And at least a dollar a ton to haul it here," the girl reckoned. "... Think we could get fifteen out of Connell for our crops?"

Morgan smiled. "Try for twelve."

She lifted her chin, smiling, but in stubbornness. "He talked us into clearing and raising hay to sell. He'd better come through! There's no other market."

There was a wet bleat from the locomotive. Curly Logan grunted. "Ain't they going to cut the cars loose? What's the point in hauling them on to Canyon and having to haul them back before we load?"

Morgan sipped the last bitter smoke from the cigar, dropped it and set his bootsole on the butt. "I reckoned you'd have heard by now, from somebody or other. I'm sorry it has to be from me. You aren't going to load, boys. Not on this railroad."

THEY were all staring at him. Curly removed his hat and replaced it, frowning. Jake Dudley's fingers tried to button the collar of his shirt. Spender's terra-cotta face showed no emotion at all. After a moment he said, "I don't git you."

"I can't give it to you any straighter, There's a shortage of cars. Connell will take every cattle car this whistle-stop line can give him."

"What are we supposed to do with

our cattle, then?" Spender asked quietly.

Morgan glanced impatiently at Laura. He saw the compressed line of her lips and the blue steadiness of her eyes on him, and something in him shrank.

"Trail them," he suggested.

"A hundred and seventy-five miles?" Laura said. "We wouldn't have beef to sell when we got there—we'd have hair and horns. And we haven't the kind of money to feed them through the winter."

After an instant Morgan said, "I know. You're in a blind. I don't know what I would do, in your place. But I wouldn't ask Connell's ramrod for advice."

"We have asked you, though, right along, ever since we settled here," Curly snapped. "And you've been smart with the answers. You had your men help us with the cabin-raisings. You talked Connell into the hay deal." Suddenly his voice stretched out like a wire. "Damn a hypocrite like you, Morgan!"

He came at the ramrod, short and chunky, white with fury, and he swung hard at Morgan's face and missed. Morgan's compact body swiveled. His fist smacked the side of Logan's jaw and the smaller man ran into the cattle pen and fell. He lay there a moment. Then he came to his knees and Laura helped him up.

Walt Spender's hand rested on the cedar grip of his revolver. He spoke, it seemed to Jesse, more out of weariness than anger. "If I was ever wrong about a man, it was you. I figgered from the first there was something wrong with the deal Connell gave us—helping us settle on land he'd used for twenty years, just because the government had opened it to settlers. But you fooled me. You let us break our backs clearing hay-land and raising cattle we couldn't sell. And now you stand there and talk as if we were squatters who'd pre-empted your water holes. How do you clear this with your conscience, Morgan?"

Morgan hesitated over his answer, and Laura Spender came up to him. "Aren't we all in the same boat, Jesse? After all, you've got land and cattle, too. How are you going to ship your cattle?"

"With Connell's," Morgan said. "He's always let me keep a brand. It's an understanding I had with him from the first."

"When was the first?"

"Five years ago. After I went broke in Idaho."

The locomotive whistled again, the watering finished. Morgan stuffed in his shirt-tail. He started to speak and halted, and then said, "I hoped you'd catch on a long time ago. It's good land, sure. But it's remote. Connell's got railroad connections, so don't waste your time ordering cars. He's big. He could make or break a dozen like you."

"Or you," Walt Spender pointed out.

"Or me. I've got a bronc, and the veteran land I took, like the rest of you. But I'm not crowding things until I know it will support me. It wants stocking. I'm going slow and easy."

"So you won't go broke, like us," Laura said.

"So I won't go broke again. It's a long way up from the bottom. Not many men make it twice, I figure."

He said to Curly, "I'm sorry, Logan. If you can't lick him, why not join him? He'll give you work."

Logan had a deflated look. A testy little cowpuncher, he looked to Morgan like a man who would never make a go of ranching even with the best of breaks. He said, "Save your handouts for range bums."

Jesse walked back to the caboose. For one moment he thought, It's not worth it. At this moment he could walk back and throw in with them—have the cars kicked off here and help load them. It

would get them through the winter; and it would get him fired.

But the dull, dread memory of those last starving months on his Idaho ranch rose . . . He was too close to making it to quit now. Another two or three years . . . He'd get one of those forest leases away from Connell, and then he could quit.

He swung up the ladder. Hearing footfalls, he glanced down. Laura stopped by the ladder, hands in her pockets, like a man, but not looking like a man. She was small, with vivid coloring, her lips full and her skin olive. "Will you tell me one thing?" she asked.

"Anything except what to do next. I don't know that."

"Why didn't you tell us what he was doing?"

"I didn't know for sure that he was. And you'd never have believed me. You'd have gone to him with the story, and I'd have been fired. I couldn't risk it, Laura. I did my best to hint."

A shudder went down the line of cars. The caboose began to move. Morgan held to the grab-iron, staring down at her.

"It must have been a hard lesson you had," she said. "It held you by the heels and shook you empty as a sack. I don't think there's a grain of courage left in you. I hope we never meet again, Jesse."

MORGAN collected his belongings from the weary trash of the caboose. Penetrating deeper into the long valley, the cattle train reached the pens at Cougar Creek. Aspen flamed against a distant hillside; the fields were tawny as a mountain lion. One day soon snow would blow over the western ranges and the country would be locked in for the winter. Down the valley, like way-posts, were the black, weathered haystacks Holt Connell fell back on when the snow was deep and cattle would not paw down to grass.

Part of the Anvil round-up crew was gathered about the pens, saddled and ready to move. Red Canby, Connell's range boss, stood at the switch with a brakeman's club in his hands. Connell himself was moving up the tracks at his long, high-heeled stride. Tip Ackerman moved at his heels, tally-board in hand.

Morgan slung down. He heard the bawling of a fortune in cattle. He saw the lazy confidence of the dozen punchers mounting to their saddles. He thought of the meagre herd of lean steers the Spender crowd was trying to ship out.

Connell held a brief consultation with a trainman. He came striding back to where Morgan was tightening cinches on his own pony, brought over from headquarters for his use.

"Ackerman will stay with the shippers," he said. "We'll load in the morning . . . Get everything?"

"They'll send out the things they didn't have," Morgan said.

Connell looked at him briefly. Between them traveled the question: How did they take it?

"They're pretty sore," Morgan said quietly.

Connell took the tally-board from Ackerman. Connell's face didn't seem hard until you knew something about him. His chin had a thrust, his eyes lidded almost lazily when he was pondering, his forehead was grooved deeply. He had a perpetually dissatisfied expression.

He gave the tally-board back to his man and walked to his horse. Mouting, Jesse looked at the cowboys drifting their ponies across the tracks. Anvil headquartered on a bench northeast of Cougar Creek. There would be another couple of weeks of rounding up, of loading, and then the tapering-off chores of cutting stovewood and repairing fence. Then half

the punchers would be let off. Connell did not sanction charity work during slack times.

As Morgan crossed the tracks, Connell and Red Canby joined him. They jogged onto the wagon-tracks which wound down the foothills. They passed haystacks pole-fenced from lazy cattle. Connell inspected them. Once he said, "Who broke into that stack?"

"I had Chap haul some hay down to the brakes," Morgan said. "I aim to tame some of that wild stuff with hay, if we can't with ropes."

"All right, but he ought to know better than to break a stack on the north end."

THEY MOVED along, until Morgan said, "I got your wire about the cars. Why didn't you tell me you were shutting the nesters out before I left?"

"Did it matter?"

"I might have come up with some kind of alibi. Maybe we could have confused them, at least."

Connell's long-lidded eyes looked him over. "I don't need alibis, Jesse," he said. "If people want to camp on me, they'll take what comes."

Red Canby shifted his body in the saddle; Morgan saw the edge of a smile on his lips. "We done the best we could by them, Jesse. Helped them build their shacks and loaned them plows and fresnos."

"In fact," Morgan said, "they might have thought we meant to play square with them."

Connell let his glance drift about the range sloughing eastward into a wide, timbered trough. His attention seemed to be on the dotted shapes of cattle and the condition of the range. His voice ran calmly across the quiet. "Where do you stand in this, Jesse?"

Morgan had a furious impulse to slap his reins-ends across Connell's bland face. The long leathers, gripped in his fist, trembled a little. He looked at the rancher who had never known what it was to be small; who thought it was as easy to run a hundred dollars up to five hundred as it was ten thousand to fifty.

But he didn't know how thoroughly failure had disciplined him. He heard his voice responding gruffly: "I thought you'd want to know how they felt, that's all. Point is, they couldn't have made a go of it on their shinplaster spreads anyway. I wouldn't have encouraged them. Or if I did, I'd have let them winter-kill."

Connell's grin came. It was warm and crooked and likeable. He said, "And let those grain-fields go to crab-grass? The cow's prime, Jesse—the cow's prime! I've been hoping to bring those bottoms into production for ten years. We'll winter another hundred and seventy cows on that feed."

They rode along. "Next," Canby said, seeming disgruntled that bad blood had ended in good, "they'd have tried to shut us out on that forest lease."

Connell shrugged. "Even a nester ain't that crazy."

Morgan speculated. But what if some nester were? What if a gang of them teamed up to bid Morgan's forest lease right out of his reach this fall, when it came up for renewal? This vast, rough, forest land which he had leased for ten years? There was talk that it might be parceled—a limit on what a man might hold. Even a chunk of it would give Jesse himself the break he needed to quit Anvil and make his try.

But taking land away from men like Connell was the sort of thing you did in dreams. He had never seriously hoped to do it. He buttoned his shirt-collar against a cold breeze sliding off the rims and told the others, "I'll check on how those outlaws have been going after the hay. See you later."

IN THE cold, windless dawn, Morgan turned out of his blankets in the bunkhouse. He glanced through a cracked window. Shaded by giant locusts and red-berried mountain ash, the yard was almost deserted. Connell's payroll peaked at twenty-five, most of whom were now busting cattle down out of the high summer pastures to the lower winter ranges. Connell shipped his cattle as two-year-olds, wintering only cows and yearlings.

Morgan was shaving at the washstand on the screen porch when Connell opened the door. "I'm going in to town," he said shortly. "You and Red and Tip can handle the loading. Then come on into Ridge."

Morgan nodded. The cowman departed. Presently Jesse and Red Canby rode out to the Cougar Creek pens where Ackerman had guarded the herd all night. Canby had a salting of reddish stubble on his face and an odor of liquor on his breath.

"Watch the stuff around the old man," Morgan said.

"Think I don't?" Red grinned. "Maybe it's none of my business, but there's one or two things you could watch, too."

Morgan found a cigar and cupped a match to its tip. "Right," he said. "It's none of your business."

"What is it—the girl?" Red asked. "You never acted like a nester-lover before."

"Ever ranch on your own?" Morgan asked. "When you've gone hungry to feed your stock a couple of winters, you'll savvy what I was talking about."

"I don't figure to. Connell's money is good enough for me."

Morgan started to reply but he had had the impression once or twice that things said to Red in confidence were told to Connell in private. He tapped his pony with the rowels and went ahead.

Reaching the high land above Cougar Creek, they saw that the train had not yet arrived to shunt the cattle cars for the loading. Instinct or hunch, he immediately had the notion that things were not right. But Canby merely glanced at the pattern of rails-and-corrals and rode down the slope. Morgan followed, frowning.

As they crossed the tracks, he said, "Red."

Canby glanced around. "Look at those steers," Morgan said.

The cowpuncher stared. "Hell! Half of them's gone!"

"And the half that's left aren't Anvil. Is that a Rafter L, or am I crazy?"

Canby breathed, "You aren't crazy." He spurred his horse. They rode around behind the pens to see if Ackerman were in the scope of junipers a hundred feet away. Suddenly Red's horse hauled up, and Jesse saw him flinch in the saddle. An instant later he discovered the rifleman who had stepped from behind a tree. It was Curly Logan.

Logan had a purple bruise on his cheekbone where Morgan's fist had taken him the day before. In a staring, rigid way, he grinned at them. His nervousness was like a set trigger. Hatless, his curly, dark hair fringed his forehead.

He said nothing and Red suddenly snapped, "Where's the cattle?"

Logan shrugged. "*Quién sabe?* I can tell you where Ackerman is, though. Hogtied under a tree."

"Logan," Jesse said, "do you know what the hell you're doing?"

"Shippin' cattle. I seen smoke in Railroad Gap ten minutes ago. We won't have long to wait."

Red glanced at Jesse. He said wryly, "I'll—be—damned!"

After a moment Jesse spoke. "Red, pull over to the pens for a minute. I want to talk to Curly alone."

Logan's gun glinted. "Set still, cowboy. You've told us how it's going to be, Morgan. Now I'll tell you. This is

my idea, not Walt and Jake's. I told Walt if he and Jake'd help me get the cattle this far, I'd get 'em the rest of the way. I'm going to set back like I was tallying when the loading starts. If anybody asks, just say this is the shipment that was slated for today. Savvy?"

"Curly," Jesse said, "the only way you're going to get out of this with a whole hide is to start riding—now. Connell will kill you if you steal his cars."

Distantly, a whistle flung a reverberating call across the hills. Logan grinned. "Let's see what the cut-proud billy-goat does do, eh? Shed your hardware, boys. We're gonna pick up Tip and get to work."

They left their guns lying on the ground and rode into the trees. Bound and gagged, Tip Ackerman lay beside a wind-tormented juniper. Freed, he had a few terse comments to make before he mounted his pony. He told Logan, "I'll leave my brand on you a foot high, cowboy. I won't leave enough of your face to decorate a dodger!"

In a tight body, they rode to the siding.

THE TRAIN was waiting, reeking of hot oil and steel. A lantern-jawed trainman in bib overalls and a greasy mackinaw approached Morgan. "Herd's shrank, ain't it?"

Curly Logan was perhaps twenty feet behind Jesse, toying with a tally-board which hid his Colt. ". . . Some cowpokes," Jesse said, "can't tell a long yearlin' from a two. I made another cut last night."

He signed the flimsies and the loading began. Manure-crusted cattle cars were moved up to the chute. Trainmen hauled a gate open and dropped the ramp from chute to car-floor. They loaded two cars, Tip, Red and Jesse pushing the cows

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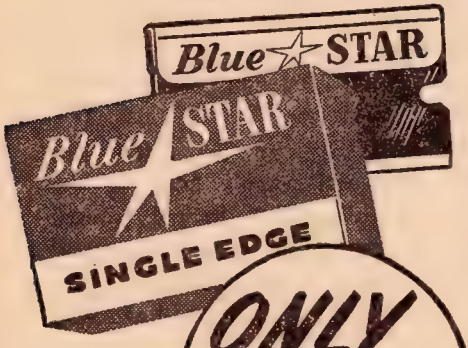

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into the chute, a trainman on the bars gadding them into the cars. The gate was locked; the locomotive whistled once and pushed up the next empty. As Tip Ackerman swung back to pry a steer out of a corner, Morgan saw that he had shaped a loop in his catch-rope. He had the sudden, sick feeling that it was all up with Curly Logan.

He let his pony drift between the men, but suddenly Tip uttered a high yell and threw the rope. It settled about the nester as Ackerman's horse threw off to the left, yanking him from the saddle. He came down on the ground, hard, and Tip slid from his pony on the off-side.

Curly's horse swerved away. On a dodging run, Ackerman went after the nester. At some time he had removed one of his stiletto-like Chihuahua spurs; now the rowel glittered in his hand, the harp of the spur gripped in his hand and the shank and rowel protruding between his knuckles. Logan lay on his belly, being slowly dragged forward by the pony.

Morgan thought, You poor son of a sheepherder!

But just as he had the thought, Curly's Colt gleamed in the dust. Tip yelled and dived at him. The gun roared. The muzzleblast whipped dust between them. Curly fired again before the Anvil cowboy hit the ground.

Tip fell, rolled and lay in a contorted huddle on the ground, his legs trembling like those of a shot jackrabbit. The spur shone in his hand.

Curly was out of the noose and standing against the corral poles like a cornered animal. "Turn your backs!" he snarled.

Cattle were lunging in terror in a far corner of the corral. Morgan looked steadily at the nester. Then he turned his horse toward the tracks. Red Canby made his pony come in beside Jesse's. They heard a gate creak and a horse moving nervously. They heard iron shoes cut the baked earth, and simultaneously a rifle-crack from the locomotive.

Curly Logan's revolver boomed. A slug struck the iron cab of the loco like a bolt dropped on an anvil. The face of the engineer disappeared. Bent over the pommel, Curly loped into the trees.

Canby's slack features began to redden as he looked down at Tip Ackerman. He swallowed his saliva several times. He said, "Scratch a nester and find a killer every time. We'll serve him at your funeral, Tip—boiled in sheepdip!"

CHAPTER TWO

The Challenge

MORGAN SENT Canby into Ridge to inform Connell and Sheriff Rideout of the murder. He listened to the trainmen talking in the explosive manner of men who have come close to death. He helped them move Ackerman out of the corral, and said, "A couple of you help me chouse these cows into the car."

The anvil-jawed brakeman inspected him curiously. "These were Logan's, weren't they?"

"What of it? You don't want to haul back empties, do you?"

Afterward, they cut the cattle cars loose. With Ackerman's body in the tender, the locomotive backed toward Ridge. Morgan left his horse in the corral and went along. At the station, he spoke to the sheriff and the crowd of townsmen and cowboys who had come down to welcome Ackerman. Canby had arrived by horse only a few minutes before. In a short time Connell came down.

He said not a word to anyone. He thrust through the crowd to where Ackerman lay in a baggage truck. In silence he inspected him. Then he turned. "In

the guts," he said. "Right in the guts."

The men chewed on this as if, Morgan thought, it proved something. *In the guts!* . . . Just like a nester, was the implication. In anger, Morgan shoved away.

"Where to, Jesse?" Connell called. "We've got to do for Tip."

"We? Doc Powell will do for him, now, with rock salt. I'm going to Brannigan's."

The town lay pleasantly in pines and golden aspen. It was small and remote, friendly enough if you paid your bills, and since he did, Jesse had friends. He had the prestige of being ramrod for Anvil. Men who thought they might need work some time tried to buy him drinks. Girls who thought he would make a good husband smiled as he passed them.

And he knew exactly how much it was all worth: It was a coin he could spend in one instant by getting himself fired. Beyond being Connell's top man, he was merely a bootsole rancher who raised a hundred and fifty cows on his five sections. It was just the right size spread to starve on.

Two people were moving through the lace of sun-and-shadow on the boardwalk. Looking like a granger more than a cowman, Walt Spender came along with his sister. Laura had a straw shopping bag over her arm. Seeing Jesse, Walt strode ahead and gripped his arm. His slow countryman's features were slack with shock.

"Jesse! What is this about Ackerman?"

"What did you hear?"

"I heard Curly'd done for him."

"That's right. He'd have done for me too if I'd had the craw to tackle him the way Tip did."

Laura had come up. Her eyes were closed for one instant. "Oh, Walt! Walt! What else can happen?"

Her brother stood there looking at Jesse. "Is that eveything?"

"That's everything I know. He drafted us to load cattle, and Tip jumped him. What do you know?"

Laura was watching him, now, her eyes bitter. "We helped him move the cattle. He'd moved yours out himself. Then we came into town and stayed last night at the hotel."

JESSE SMILED a little and she said angrily, "Don't! I'm not trying to blame Curly for everything. We were ready for anything, only not willing to take the risk. Anything we could do—anything—would have been fair retaliation."

"Anything but murder," her brother said.

"What about our cattle?" Laura asked.

"They're on the way to the feed-lots."

Laura stared at him. "I don't understand you," she said frankly. "One day you behave like a coward. The next you actually risk your job for someone else."

"If our steers had been ready, I'd have dumped yours. Does that answer it?"

He saw a faint smile form on her lips. "Or perhaps you were trying to prove I was wrong about you?"

"Maybeso," Morgan said.

Walt had hardly been listening. He started past Jesse, but Jesse stopped him. "Not now. You'd better get back to your place. Don't forget whose cattle Logan was pushing."

"The hell with them," Walt snapped. "If Connell's got anything to say to me, he can say it himself this time. Laura, go back to the hotel."

He went on down the shaded walk, a big, square-shouldered and lonely man.

Morgan said, "I'd like to walk you back, Laura."

"Aren't you afraid of being compro-

missed?" She didn't smile as she said it.

"Let's say we're both taking some risk." Taking her arm, he crossed to the other side of the street, where the small frame hotel stood on a corner beyond a woodyard.

"Laura," he asked suddenly, "can you talk Walt into selling out and leaving?"

"I couldn't talk him into anything I didn't approve of myself."

"Would you approve of his being lynched?"

"Connell wouldn't try it. He wouldn't dare."

"Why wouldn't he? You've killed one of his men."

"Did we? I thought it was a neighbor of ours, who isn't even a friend any longer. Curly said he wouldn't use a gun. He said he'd have them on board before you knew about it."

They were at the hotel. Jesse took her hands. "Listen to me, Laura. Nothing like this has happened to Connell before. I don't know what he'll do. But he'll hit back—count on that. Be good to yourselves, and get out."

Smiling a little, she shook her head. "You're a better man than I thought, Jesse. I think you're really sorry for us. But we know so little about crawling that we actually came to town to see about getting some of that state forest range."

Morgan smiled. "If it weren't so far-fetched it would be funny. Laura, Connell's had that range for ten years on a long-term lease. There's talk that it will be parceled—a limit on each rancher's holding. Even so, rules are just made to be broken. Red Canby might take a parcel and sub-let. I might, too."

"And we might, and not sub-let."

He smiled at her intensity. "Got all the money you'd need, I expect?"

"We'd get it. We'd sell half our herd for the lease money, and hope to get enough cattle on the strength of the lease to stock it. It isn't," she said, "that we don't know how to make do."

"No," Jesse agreed. "It's more, I'd say, that you don't know Connell."

Her chin lifted in defiance; then she ran lightly up the steps, her skirts held high, and vanished into the hotel.

WHEN THEY WERE in town, the Anvil crew drank at Brannigan's Bar. Morgan drank alone at Brannigan's that morning, with his hat on the counter and a lone bartender to serve him. The man stood half in the door and half out, polishing beer schooners as he watched the foot of town.

"Here they come!" he said suddenly.

Morgan didn't look around. He heard iron tires grind past. The bartender said, "God! He's bent like a horseshoe!"

In a few minutes, having delivered the body of the Anvil cowpuncher at the undertaker's, men began to drift back. They were constrained by an awed sort of silence. They talked little, but tension quickened when Holt Connell and Red Canby entered. Connell stopped beside Morgan. Jesse saw his face in the backbar. It was a sullen, stormy red.

Connell took whiskey with a beer chaser. Canby downed his shot and placed the glass solidly on the bar.

"Will somebody tell me why we didn't lynch him?" he demanded.

Bill Getty, Connell's top bronc-stomper, who was Indian-dark and Indian-straight and always appeared to be groping for a forgotten name, said mildly, "Plenty of trees on his own land, ain't they?"

"Shut your mouth," Connell said. He poured another drink.

Getty broke horses for Anvil. He had broken horses so long he occasionally spat blood and subsisted on milk and whiskey. "I never heard you take anything off a nester before," he said.

There was an awkward silence, as if

something in extremely bad taste had been uttered. Canby stared furiously at him, trying to silence him.

"Did I take something off him?" Connell asked.

"He cussed you out for stealing his cars," Getty pointed out. "And he's still here."

"About tomorrow night," said Red Canby darkly, "he won't be."

Morgan faced him suddenly. "You talk mighty brave, Red. Going to throw a scare into them?"

"Scare?" Canby's mouth twisted sardonically. "We'll burn 'em out! Then we'll put what's left of Spender and Jake Dudley on a flatcar and start them down the grade."

"Why don't you just go after the girl? She'd make less fight than the men."

"Sometimes," Connell said, "you sound like a nester yourself. What are you after?"

"I'm trying to find out what makes Curly Logan so tough that you don't go after him. I'd lead that posse myself. But I won't see the Spenders and old Dudley burned out."

"Won't, eh?"

Connell looked for the bartender. "I'll buy drinks for every man who thinks those sheep camp boomers have asked for anything they get. Anybody that doesn't think do, step back and make room."

Morgan finished his liquor and moved back a stride. He faced Red Canby and Connell. He was aware of Bill Getty's pleased smirk. He stood alone. The barman set out bottles and the men poured their own; more, thought Jesse, in sheepish seconding of a foolish notion than in eagerness.

"I've always gone to bat for my boys before," Connell said. "I won't quit Tip just because he's been murdered."

"You're making sounds like a liquor-logged preacher," said Morgan. A crazy delight was in him that the split had come at last. ". . . When did you ever go to bat for a man who needed twenty-five bucks for false teeth or a winter coat?"

Red pushed away from the bar. His eyes, yellow as a coyote's, burned with ambition: the ambition to whip Morgan and the yen to have his job. He said, "Drag, cowboy."

"Come on," Morgan grinned. "Put me out."

WITHOUT warning Red threw a left at Jesse's head. Jesse clamped onto the cowboy's wrist and pulled him off balance, and slammed him in the face with his bunched knuckles. Red slewed away and went to his knees and came up crying with anger. Hunched, Morgan awaited him, aware of the delighted faces of Canby's own men.

Red threw a wild overhand punch that

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thudded into Jesse's shoulder. Frantically he closed in a bear hug and attempted to slug at Jesse's kidneys. Squeezing up, Morgan's hand found the redhead's throat and dug into his windpipe. Canby gulped and pulled away, and Morgan drove to his jaw.

The bar caught Red and Bill Getty panted, "Go git him, boy!" and shoved him away.

Hurt and bleeding, Red floundered in. Morgan wasn't there, but his foot was, and the range foreman tripped over it and fell face-down on the floor. He came up with sawdust on his bloody mouth, looked for Morgan and, taking a breath, went for him again. The muscles of Jesse's back and shoulders gathered; he hit Red Canby in the face as the puncher wallowed in. Canby's neck snapped. He fell away; a man grunted in sympathetic agony. There had hardly been a sound since the fight started. It had been obvious from the outset that Red was going to be whipped, and now that he had had his try at hurting Morgan, nothing was left for him to do but to try to keep away from Morgan.

Morgan stalked him, turning Canby's head with a blow to the cheek, turning it back with another, doubling him with a short punch to the belly and chipping an uppercut into his chin to straighten him. He stood there and looked at Red's misshapen face and saw the whipped eyes. As Jesse's fist went back, Red's eyes closed and he turned his head, too spent to avert the blow.

Morgan lowered his hand. He took a breath and blew it out. "Put out some little fellow next time," he said.

Canby took two steps and collapsed on a chair and slowly let his head rest on the top of a table.

Morgan went back to the men at the bar. He told Connell, "As long as I live, I'll be taking creosote baths trying to get the smell of Anvil off me."

"That may not be so long," Connell said.

MORGAN was in the barber chair when Sheriff Rideout took a posse of twenty men down the street. Two packhorses carrying food went with them. Heaven help you, Curly, Morgan thought. Rideout knows these hills better than God.

Later he talked to the banker, Tom Cullinane. "How much am I good for, Tom?" he asked him.

Cullinane was an old rancher who had tired of warring against the elements and had got himself in the position of profiting by good weather or bad. He had loaned Jesse money before, and now he glanced at a ledger and grunted, "You've been a pretty good risk, Jesse. But how good are you now that you're on your own?"

"I figure I'm better than I ever was. I'm going to be ranching on another twenty-five sections by winter."

Cullinane's thorny eyes left the ledger. "Leaving?"

"I'm going after part of Connell's forest lease. It's up for renewal. The story is it will be parceled four ways."

"That's the story, all right. But who cares about regulations in this country?"

"The ones who profit by them. Connell's had the land on a twelve cents per acre rent basis. I'll go fifteen."

"With my money, eh?" Cullinane growled. "That'd come to twenty-four hundred, Jesse. I wouldn't pay that much for your layout, lock, stock and ramrod."

"I'm not asking you to. I'm throwing in with Spender and his sister."

Cullinane stared. "Damn such a fool! I'd give odds they're all out of here within forty-eight hours—voluntarily or otherwise. You'll cut your own throat to tie up with them."

Jesse took his hat. "Tom, it'll be this way or not at all. I know how far a dime can be stretched before it snaps back in

your face. I've had it happen. It won't happen again."

Cullinane gazed a while into the wintry street. Then he said, "Have it your own ignorant way. Make it fifteen hundred. I'll still be getting your ranch cheap."

Morgan smiled. "I'll be ranching that iron when Ridge is as big as Denver."

"I reckon you know the details. Bids will be opened in Salem two weeks from now. It'll be a month before we hear. Don't waste time if you aim to bid."

Morgan left quickly.

Standing in the cold sweep of wind on the street, Jesse felt a turbulent excitement. Beyond the roofs of town the rimrock swept up, tawny with grass, dark with bands of trees. The range was summer-rested, waiting for the cattle Connell would put back on it after the beef cut. Now, suddenly, the means of ranching a share of that range was Jesse's.

At once he turned and made his way to the hotel. Approaching it, he saw a man working at a side-bar wagon, under a leafless poplar. Jesse stopped at the corner of the hotel and observed Walt Spender carefully packing provisions under a gray tarpaulin.

"I heard you didn't scare," he said.

Walt stared at him. He wiped his palms on his thighs. "I said I wouldn't quit, didn't I?"

Morgan thought, I like this fellow. I like a man who fights best out of a corner. He got the cigar burning and dropped the match.

"I just quit Connell," he said.

SPENDER took a chew of Navy, worked it up and turned to the side-door of the hotel. He came back in ten minutes with his sister. She wore a plain gray gown and had drawn a shawl over her head. Morgan had the impression that cold water had been applied to eyes puffy with weeping. But she could still regard him coolly.

"You told me you'd be willing to gamble on some forest land," Jesse said. "I found out from Cullinane that it will cost twenty-four hundred to bid on it."

"Is that the good news you called me out to tell me?"

Morgan shook his head. "I called you out to tell you how we could swing it. Cullinane's agreed to back me for half the amount. He'll carry you for the rest. We could split the land."

Spender and Laura looked at each other. She turned back to Morgan. "Tell Connell it won't work. Let him send Red Canby next time."

"All right," Jesse said. "I reckon Red's the man he'll send. They're after Logan right now. They'll be after you next."

Laura's voice suddenly reached after him as he gained the boardwalk. "Jesse!" He waited while she came through the frost-killed weeds toward him. He saw the shine of tears in her eyes.

"Jesse, forgive us if we're suspicious of anything good that's offered us. The last proposition you made us was to raise hay for Connell. Remember?"

Jesse held her hands. "I'd like to forget . . . We'll go to Cullinane right now, if you think this is a trick. He'll write the letter to the land office receiver and enclose a check to cover our bid."

Suddenly her hands squeezed his. She turned to call her brother. "Walt! Let it go! We're going into business!"

With a crusted steel pen, Tom Cullinane made something official out of what had been a cowboy's dream. Afterward, Jesse told them, "It will be a month before we know whether we've got the land. Meantime we'll have to start cutting stovewood and provisioning. If we get it, we'll shove the cattle over there and dig in. That Cow Creek pasture is the fattest twenty-five section Connell owns. It'll kill him."

Walt's ardor began to anneal. "Cow Creek's a long way from my place. How'll

we manage that end of the deal?"

"Move in with me when we get word. My cabin is just across the creek."

"In the meantime," Walt asked, "what about Sis? I'm not the fair-haired boy with Connell. How far will he go to hang my hide on a fence?"

Morgan said soberly, "About as far as he has to. Tighten the cinches—that's all I can tell you. He wouldn't hurt her deliberately, but bullets have a way of glancing off kitchen ranges. And don't range your stock too deep."

JESSE took his own advice home with him. He bought a second-hand wagon and carried his cowboy's gathering of blankets, saddle gear and odds and ends from Anvil to his own one-room cabin. High in the piñon brakes at the foot of a mountain lay the cabin and pole corrals. He brought his mother herd into the grassy park below it. He held onto his yearlings; he would need the money they represented, but he needed the cattle worse. Months ago, he had hired some Basques to cut wild hay. Fenced from deer and stock, the trusses dotted his storm pastures.

One day he dropped two mule-deer. He put the meat down in lard cans, sealing them and laying them away in the loft. In the yard, ricks of stovewood huddled against the wall. He dug a root cellar and put down all the vegetables he could afford.

He borrowed a plow. On the day he commenced breaking ground for his winter rye, the first snow fell. From a windless sky it fell all day. In late afternoon the clouds blew in; the sun came out to melt the snow. The ground was dark and greasy, and Jesse took the hint. He worked himself and the team stubbornly to get the rye in.

He had a sudden sense of pressure. Time was running out. In this high country snow could come early and stay late Connell was making up the big day-herd to move onto the Cow Creek pasture; each night Jesse gazed down the slopes falling away into the broad valley of Cow Creek, searching for cattle. It would be one thing to keep Connell off the land, another to put him off.

An Anvil line rider stopped one day. His name was Shepley, and Jesse had been friendly with him. "I can't talk ag'in my employer, Jesse," he mentioned, "but they'll finish working the cattle directly. You can look for them in a week or ten days."

"I'll wait on them," Jesse said. "Thanks. What's new on Curly Logan?"

"Nothing. Rideout lost his trail. He musta gone to Idaho."

A month after his interview with Cullinane, Jesse rolled some food in a blanket and lashed the blanket behind his saddle. He took the looping trail through the foothills and slanted down to Ridge at dusk. He saw the Spenders' wagon at the hotel, but he made camp near the creek, and in the morning he stopped at the bank as soon as he saw Tom Cullinane walking up from the livery stable. Cullinane stopped on the steps, a solemn, raw-skinned man with a gray scarf about his neck. He said tersely, "Still want that land?"

"Bound to have it."

"Get your friends, then. The letter came in four days ago. You get a parcel, and so do Bill Getty and Red Canby. You wouldn't want to re-sell to Connell, like them? I reckon you could turn a nice profit."

Smiling, Jesse strode to the hotel. He got Walt Spender. He was surprised and gloomy to learn that Laura had come in only part way and stayed with Jake Dudley and his wife. "Figured she'd be safer there than at the cabin, and she's got too much to do to lose two days. Jake was to take her back this morning."

"How's Jake making out?"

"He'd have made out better fifteen years ago. I reckon he may sell out, one of these days."

At once Jesse knew what had happened. "Did they rough him up?"

Spender took his pipe from his mouth. "Not so much but what it can be paid back without a gun. Bill Getty came down and shot his plow team and knocked him around some. I didn't know it until yesterday, on the way in."

They signed papers at Cullinane's bank.

A little awkwardly, they shook hands and had a drink on it. "Move up next week, if you can," Morgan suggested. "We can throw up a couple of rooms. It'll be a push to do anything before snow."

HE BOUGHT a few things he could carry with him and rode down to the small camp he had made by the creek. As he came from the trees onto the sandy shelf along the stream, he saw a man sitting on a rock waiting for him. Holt Connell threw his cigarette in the stream and rose while Morgan dismounted.

"I hear you got your land," he said.

"Did you?"

"I'm giving Red and Bill a hundred and twenty-five each above what the leases cost. I'll give you five."

"Cow Creek's pasture's worth more than that."

Connell's eyes were steady, dark with rancor. "How much?" he asked.

"Why don't you wait 'til I scare out, and take it for nothing? That's the treatment you're using on Dudley, isn't it?"

Connell had been big too long to dicker well. "How much?" he demanded, his voice striking with toothed harshness across the quiet creek sounds.

"Ten thousand dollars," said Jesse. "In cash."

Connell regarded him with blunted fury. He crossed his arms. "Listen to me, now," he said. "I developed that land. I fenced the bogs and cleaned the springs. I pampered it. If it's worth twice what any pasture in the county's worth now, it's because I put the value into it. I won't throw it away to anybody with a paper with some stamps on it."

"Ten cents an acre," Jesse grunted. "That piece of land was what started you off. You could have built a line shack every mile and still have been ahead at that rent."

Connell said, "I've got a check for a thousand dollars in my pocket. I'll pay you that for your share of the lease. I'll make my own deal with the Spenders. You've got as long as it takes you to smoke a cigarette, if you want to think it over."

Jesse picked up a piñon branch beside the hearth of his last night's fire, squatted by it and began snapping off twigs. "So long," he said.

Connell threw a balled paper on the twigs, and Jesse saw that it was a check. "So long," Connell said.

CHAPTER THREE

The Rope

JESSE put in four days moving his cattle onto the pasture. A feeling of uneasiness nagged him. Time was short. The weather was changing, with winds and clouds every day. He was coming in with the wagon one afternoon when he saw a rider sliding from the timbered slope behind his cabin. The man rode straight to the corral and dismounted. He turned his horse into the corral and strode to the cabin.

Jesse laid his rifle across his knees as he came into the yard. When the man turned, he knew him—he knew at once that it was Curly Logan.

He sat there while Logan walked to the wagon. He looked like a fox after a hard winter, starved and sharpened. Logan said, "I've got to have food and

tobacco, Morgan. Shoes for my hoss. And quick!"

"You had your damned nerve coming here," Jesse said.

Logan had the keen, breathless look of a man on the dodge. "I didn't know this was your place," he said. "I ain't choosy, anyhow. If any Anvil rider sees me, I'm finished. My horse won't take me fifteen miles."

After a moment, Jesse slung down. "File and shoes in the grain shed," he said. "I'll find some grub for you. Then you get out and never come back. Understand? The only difference between you and any other murderer is that you were crowded into it."

Curly turned and ran to the small grain-shed half-sunk into the slope. Entering the cabin, Morgan assembled hard-tack, bacon, coffee and a sack of beans. He ran out and helped Curly with the shoeing. The shoes were worn down to the frogs. As they finished, Curly panted, "Got paper and pencil?"

"What for?"

Curly started toward the cabin. "Something I've got to leave with you."

"I don't want you to leave anything with me, dammit!"

Logan was already entering the cabin. Swearing, Jesse threw the old plates in the grain shed and brought the pony out. The wind was cold and strong against his face. He tied the food behind the cantle and then went to get Curly. The nester was coming out of the cabin. He had torn a paper sack in two and writen on it in pencil.

"What is it?" Jesse demanded.

"Quit-claim to my place. It ain't much, but it's yours, Jesse. I'll never need it now."

Morgan's head turned. Faintly he had heard a horse nicker. He turned back. "There's somebody coming. Take the trail to Split-Rock. Follow the creek southwest to Harney Valley. You can make it out through Nevada. Anywhere east, you may get caught by snow. And take that damned paper with you."

Logan's dark face broke in a crooked grin. He tucked the paper into a crack in the door. "Hang onto it, kid. Spring it on them when you need it worst. I said to myself this morning, 'If he outfits me, I'll give him my place. If he don't, I'll give him a bullet in the guts.' "

There were hoof-clops at the north end of the horse trap, and there was ice in Jesse Morgan. He said, "I thought you didn't know this was my place."

Curly's mouth recorded the blunder. His chin sagged. "I mean—I meant, if I—"

Jesse knocked him off the porch with the back of his fist. He sprang down beside him and yanked his gun out of the holster. He threw it in the brush.

"Connell sent you here, did he? Buying your way out by coyoting on me! *Get out!*"

He stood over him with his Colt drawn. He was shaking. The horses were crossing the blue-clay slope, hidden from sight by a grassy hump rising from the stream. Logan got up and backed away.

"Had to, Jesse!" he said. "They'd 'a' hung me right there. I'm givin' you the land, ain't I? I'm doing the best I can . . ."

"To plant evidence!" Jesse's finger trembled in the trigger guard.

Logan ran to his pony, picked up the reins and took saddle at a lope. He knifed straight for the trees, their spires hidden in a wet mist. Morgan went to the door and tore the quit-claim from it. Balling the paper hard, he threw it onto the sod roof. He ran to the grain-shed to hide the horseshoes, and then he heard the rifle-crack, and spun back against the shed, his hand groping for his Colt.

THE shot died stubbornly, rocking from ridge to ridge, falling down stair-steps into silence. The smoke was a blue

smear against a serviceberry thicket. Logan lay on the meadow fifty yards short of the trees, flopping like a shot jackrabbit. The gun cracked again and the flopping slowly died.

Jesse ducked into the shed but immediately he heard horses striking up the slope. He threw the shoes into a sack of oats and shoved them deep. Then he stood in the gloom and rolled a cigarette. He was smoking it when he came out carrying a sack filled with grain.

Holt Connell and Bill Getty were there with four other Anvil men. They were dismounted, and Connell stood with the horses while Getty bowlegged toward the cabin. Seeing him, they all started.

Jesse said, "What the hell! This used to be a quiet piece of country. Now every cowpuncher in the county comes through riding to hounds."

"Got ours," Bill Getty grinned. He walked slowly toward Jesse.

"Stay right there, Bill," Jesse warned. "Let's talk some more. What are you after? I heard a horse running by and then a shot."

Someone was riding in from the thicket. At a glance he saw it was Red Canby. Canby slowly skirted Logan's body and came on.

"The hell with all the tomfoolery," said Connell. "You could get maybe two of us, Jesse; I doubt it. Red's got orders to fire if I raise my hand, and he's heeled this minute. Better raise yours."

Jesse looked at the six of them. He didn't look at Canby. It was unnecessary. He had the choice of quick death or what might be more painful but was less lasting. Slowly he brought his hands out shoulder-high. Connell came forward, carrying a rope. Bill Getty slid in and took his gun. Then he suddenly slammed him in the back of the head with his fist, and Jesse went down.

Hands dragged at him and he was dazedly on his feet. He began to swing at Connell, but someone lunged at him and he fell again with a pain in his jaw. Again he was standing and being thrust along toward a mountain ash behind the cabin. As he stood under it, something took his attention upward. He saw the webbing of branches, bright with berries, and the slowly tumbling storm clouds above it. Then he saw something tawny writhing over a branch, and a moment later he felt the end of the rope as it topped the branch and fell back onto him.

Canby threw the loop over his head. Jesse suddenly came to life. A silent scream rang in him. He saw Connell's face and it was sallow and drawn with fury. Fists smashed at him. He was crushing Canby's neck in the vise of his elbow, slugging at his face as they fell. Then he was being prodded by furious boots kicking at his head and body, and the strength was gone from him.

When he was aware of what was happening once more, his hands had been tied behind him. Four of the punchers were on the rope and the tautness of it kept his chin tilted. Connell, laboring for breath, came up to him. His mouth was bleeding.

"God-damn' nester-lover!" he said. "Only one thing worse than a nester—a man who'll sleep in the same bed with one."

"They'll get you," Jesse said.

Connell grinned. "Will they?" He looked at the others, and Bill Getty laughed.

It frightened Jesse, for an instant, beyond fear for himself. "What did you do to them?" he demanded.

"Burned them out," Connell said plainly. "When they come back and find they haven't got a cabin, and the first big storm building, they won't stay around to argue."

He had not harmed them, then . . . Jesse breathed freely and looked up at the boiling sky.

"You've got a weak spot, Connell," he said. "They'll find it. It'll only take one man to drive a knife into it. And the time's about prime."

Connell waited for him to continue, and Jesse closed his mouth. Connell came close, trying to make his curiosity appear to be cynicism. "Scare me some more." Jesse said nothing. After a moment, when he knew he had finished, Connell glanced at Canby. "Okay."

Jesse heard them grunt. The rope seemed to strike him under the jaws. He was off his feet and dangling, and now he wanted to scream and beg, but he was choking on the blood dammed in his throat. Thumbs were behind his eyeballs, pressing them from the sockets. His body whipped on the rope. Then he was drowning in dark water, and the only thing of importance was the rope around his neck. But he had no hands to tear it away, he had nothing to work with but fear, and a man can choke on that, too. And Jesse choked, and died, and death was astonishingly simple. It was merely watching stars group themselves and listening to a gigantic roaring.

HE HEARD himself breathing. It was a painful sound, and he felt a detached sympathy for any man to whom air was so precious. For a long time he listened to it. Then he found he was lying on his back staring upward through the tree at the sky. It was darker. The rope was gone from his neck but his hands were still tied. Morgan felt a hotness of tears come to his eyes. Connell had been afraid to go through with it.

He rose but immediately had to sit down again. He was dizzy and sick. Against his back the wind was strong and cold. He heard it sweeping the pines on a near ridge.

Then he entered the cabin and went through to the porch. Nothing had been touched and there was no sign of the Anvil men. With a butcher knife, he managed to sever the rope about his wrists. Then, in the dusky cabin, he made a fire and lighted a lamp. He made coffee, and all through the ritualistic motions of these things he worked for self-control. He had an impulse to saddle and follow Connell and bring down all the men he could before they dropped him. But he had been impractical too long for that.

He wondered about Curly Logan, if he still lay on the meadow or had been buried.

An hour after sundown he heard a change in the voice of the wind, a harsh rise; he wondered suddenly about the Spenders. He hoped they had returned to their burned cabin early enough to make it to town before the storm broke.

Suddenly he heard a wagon on the road. He snuffed the lamp and slipped onto the porch, his rifle ready. The snow had commenced falling. It whirled through the yard in a rush of small, dry flakes. He saw a familiar gray team, dusty with snow, and Walt Spender's voice shouted at the dark cabin. "Jesse! All right?"

Jesse coaxed a flame up in a bullseye lantern. He walked over dry ridges of snow to the wagon. Laura saw at once that something was wrong, and she was out of the wagon and her hands touched his. "Something's happened! Have they been here, too?"

Jesse nodded. "Put the horses under the shelter, Walt."

While they unloaded, Laura found food for dinner. The cabin was choked with the gear of two households, but they sat at the table and ate with hungry weariness, and Morgan told them what had happened.

"Either the knot came loose or they backed down. I'm still here. He told me he'd burned you out."

Walt's mouth broke wryly. "We saw them from the foothills, an hour after we'd pulled out. They broke in the door and threw rock oil over the floor. It went

up in ten minutes. But we'd pulled out."

"You know him, now," Morgan said. "Well enough to keep moving, I hope."

Laura sounded tired. "What kind of people do you think we are, Jesse? To leave a partner in the position you're in."

"What makes you think I'm staying?"

"Your stubbornness, I suppose. But I can't see you leaving."

"No. But we're through ranching for a while. It's got to be him or us, and it's got to be soon. He pulled his punch this time; I don't remember that he ever left a man in a place before that he had a second chance. But he did this time, and I'm using it."

"How?" Walt demanded.

Jesse leaned back. It was almost silent except for the cracking of knots in the stove. But beyond the shutters the snow was drifting down, the flakes growing larger. Winter was moving in.

"Snow," Jesse said. "It comes back to what makes this range tough, to begin with. Connell's already on the hook with the cattle he figured to range here. He overgrazes as a policy, but he handles it by haying. We've had two easy winters, and he's got enough hay to winter half the cows in the county. But that hay isn't iron. It can be spoiled. It could even be burned."

After a moment Walt grinned. "Not if it's covered with snow," he said. "We'll have to hurry."

"Tonight?" Laura demanded.

"If we start at midnight, we can be through around sun-up," Jesse said. "By tomorrow, he may put out line riders."

Laura regarded him soberly. She saw the wicked shine of anticipation in her brother's eyes. "Will that stop him?" she demanded. "Or will it just slow him down and bring him back eventually with a posse?"

Jesse said, "It will stop him, Laura. Believe me, it will stop him, if I know Holt Connell."

She looked as though she did not quite understand him, which was what Jesse wanted.

ABOUT ten o'clock, Jesse put on a jacket and went out to saddle. He came back. "Six inches already. Laura, the stovewood's out the back door, alongside the wall. The cabin's warm."

He put crackers and sardines in a sack. Walt began to don heavy clothing. At the last, Morgan broke a block of wax matches in two, gave half to Walt and put the others in his pocket. Then he stood by the stove to finish a last cup of coffee. "Well," he said.

"I'm ready," Walt said. He put his hat on, then removed it and kissed his sister. "Keep a pot of coffee on the back of the stove," he directed. "And keep the door locked and the lamp out."

"All right, Walt. . . . I want to say, 'be careful', but you're not going out to be careful, are you?"

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Walt patted her arm and went out. They were alone for a moment, then, Jesse and Laura, and he went to her. She came against him, her face pressing his jacket, and he heard her trying not to cry, taking short little breaths and clutching him tightly.

"You mean he'd follow you until he found you, didn't you?" she whispered.

"Yes. But he'll find two wildcats, honey. We'll be ready. It's our turn to bushwhack. Curly's out in the meadow, and old Jake's had his lesson. And now Big Holt Connell gets his."

The last he saw of her, she was standing with one hand touching the table on which the lamp burned, her teeth biting her lip to keep it from trembling.

Riding north along the western rim of the valley, Morgan brought to his mind the pattern of haystacks. Connell did nothing without plan: For convenience, the stacks lay in a wide semi-circle with the Anvil main buildings as a hub. The snow fell lightly and without much cold. The ponies scuffed through a few inches of dry fall that swirled like smoke under their hoofs. They rode through Ridge, with an eye out for Anvil horses. They did not see any, and took time for a drink at Brannigan's. They took a pint with them and started north along the railroad tracks.

AT COUGAR CREEK bridge, Morgan swung east toward Anvil. About now, he reckoned, Connell would be turning in with a half-pint of whiskey in him and the weariness of a day filled with chesting his authority. He would be sagging heavily into sleep without guessing that on the creek a half mile west, a couple of punchers were lifting off the bars about his penned stacks.

They pulled away trusses of hay until they reached the dry, cured core of the loaf-shaped stack. Then they struck matches and got a good blaze going. They moved around to another side and the heat of the flames reached out to them. From a quarter-mile away, they saw the red tower mounting through the thin fall of snow.

"Will they see it?" Walt pondered.

"Sooner or later. This storm's got more holes in it than an Anvil saddle-blanket. This is the trail that anybody coming in will use, too."

They followed the turning of Cougar Creek to the upper creek pasture. On this higher ground, Connell had three large mounds of old hay. It had hardly been touched the last two winters. Inside, it was dry, voracious for flame, and they saw the burning straws soar high on the hot draft. Black, curled corpses of straws fell on their Stetsons and coat-sleeves as they moved farther north.

Sometime after midnight, the storm tore apart. They saw rifts of sky glittering with frozen stars. A continent of clouds shifted indecisively. A few last flakes floated in the air.

Reaching a hogback, they looked back and saw red puddles of light in a far meadow. Walt Spender growled something and his gloved hand pointed. Jesse saw the minute points of lantern-light along Deer Creek. Then the lanterns went out.

"Hunting our sign," he said. "Just being sure we haven't left the trail and taken off."

He thought of Connell, insane with fear and fury, leaving a man here to try to haul off what hay he could save; another there, and slicing ahead with a gun across his saddle. But Jesse held his strategy to firing stacks until he came to a place where they would put themselves in a pocket by riding to the next haystack.

Then he swung east to catch a stack in a stubbled field beside a stream, the best bottom-land Connell had, and the finest hay. The horses were moving sluggishly. They stood with heads hanging while the

men turned the rich haystacks into roaring kilns. The snow looked bloody in the firelight; around the stacks, it melted quickly into soaked ground.

When they moved out, Morgan sought high ground and studied the hills behind them. He said suddenly, "They outfigured us, there, Walt. They cut off that pocket, too. We'll have to hit it up to beat them."

The snow softened the lines of the trail to Anvil headquarters. Jesse had ridden it for too many winters to miss it now. He swung past familiar landmarks, wondering if Connell knew how the night was going to end, now. They cut through coulees where tiny streams ran between shallow banks of snow; over black rimrocks dusted with snow, and then through a grove of silent aspen that ended at the foot of the big horse-trap. To forestall any guard Connell might have left, Jesse roped a post and pulled over a section of fence. They entered the trap and came at the ranch from a different angle.

Jesse rode high on the stirrups, staring straight ahead. The big ranchhouse was dark. The barns and sheds were silent, but a few horses moved in the corrals. He told Walt: "Let the horses out."

He walked toward the long, two-storied ranchhouse. He knocked and waited, his carbine ready. The screen door was unlatched. He strode inside, through the kitchen with its big tin-sheeted table, into the parlor. He was glad Connell had no women-folk. It made it simpler. With his rifle, he knocked three wall-lamps from their brackets. Lighting the glistening oil puddles, he walked back to the kitchen. He smashed the lamp against the cookstove.

When he ran out, the windows were orange. The barn was beginning to blaze. He heard horses running in the trap. He stood rigidly.

"Walt!" he shouted. "Did you turn those horses into the trap?"

Spender came from the bunkhouse. Flames were surging up behind him. "No. Just let them out in the yard," he said.

"Then for God's sake hit for the smithy!" Jesse yelled.

WALT sprawled for the shack between the bunkhouse and the main ranch building. Across the yard, there was a potato cellar, like a half-loaf of bread set against the ground. Jesse swung in the door to it and went down three steps. Turning, he laid the barrel of the carbine on the top step. The was a musty odor of warm earth. There was the new fragrance of burning wood. The horses were chopping up through the horse pasture. A man's voice bawled something.

Jesse saw them as they came into the light. Firelighted, the horses looked like mounts from the Apocalypse. They reared back from the fire, and Connell clubbed his down with his rifle-barrel. Red Canby was with him, impetuously shoving forward, and Bill Getty and another man were there. Canby rode into the center of the yard and his horse wheeled, terrified of the heat.

Suddenly Connell slipped from the saddle. A mountain ash grew in the yard, shading the porch of the house; he crouched behind the trunk of it, and now Jesse heard his shout:

"In the smithy! It's the only building that's not on fire! Get the bushwhacking son!"

Canby whirled toward it, firing at the half-closed door. There was a ringing clatter of iron. Getty and the other man surged forward. Jesse let Getty have it in the side. His gun leaped with the red recoil. The sound of the shot rolled across the yard. Getty was out of the saddle, and the other man was turning blankly toward the root-cellar. Jesse fired a second shot from the Henry at this man's chest. The puncher dropped his gun; he turned as though to dismount, but suddenly caught at the saddle-horn and the horse leaped from under him.

Connell sprawled flat, his gun lying along the ground as he drew bead on the door of the cellar. Jesse brought up another shell and saw Canby jump from his horse and spill behind a rick of wood. He fired again at the smithy, and a gun inside lashed back at him.

Somewhere a section of roof sagged and cracked. Sparks showered the yard. Holt Connell lay motionless behind the rifle; then it kicked, dust rolling before it, and a bullet exploded in grit before Morgan's face. He was blinded. He sagged back and pressed his hand over his eyes. A gun roared again and the slug whipped past him and struck the earthen back wall.

He heard Canby call out a formless word that was more of a gasp, and he could hear Walt shout a taunting curse. He heard boots nearing his shelter on a run, and looking up he saw Connell sprinting for the shelter of the root-cellar. He supposed Connell had taken his silence for death; he was holing up in the dugout to match shots with the nester.

Jesse rose silently on his knees and raised the carbine. Connell saw him when he was only twenty feet distant. He swerved away, hugging the stock of his rifle between his ribs and bicep as he snapped off the shot. At the same time Jesse let his shot go. The gun kicked at his shoulder, he heard the impact of the rancher's snap-shot against the earth. Connell kept running, but it was a blind sort of run that ended against a wagon. He recoiled from it and fell, came to his hands and knees and slumped again.

After a while it was quiet in the yard. The ranchhouse was entirely aflame, filling the night with its hungry roar. The men on the ground lay still, except for Bill Getty, who twitched—then stopped.

Jesse called, "Walt?"

"Okay," Walt said. "All right, Jesse?"

"All right," Jesse said.

They met under the tree and looked at the house for a moment, and then silently went to find their horses.

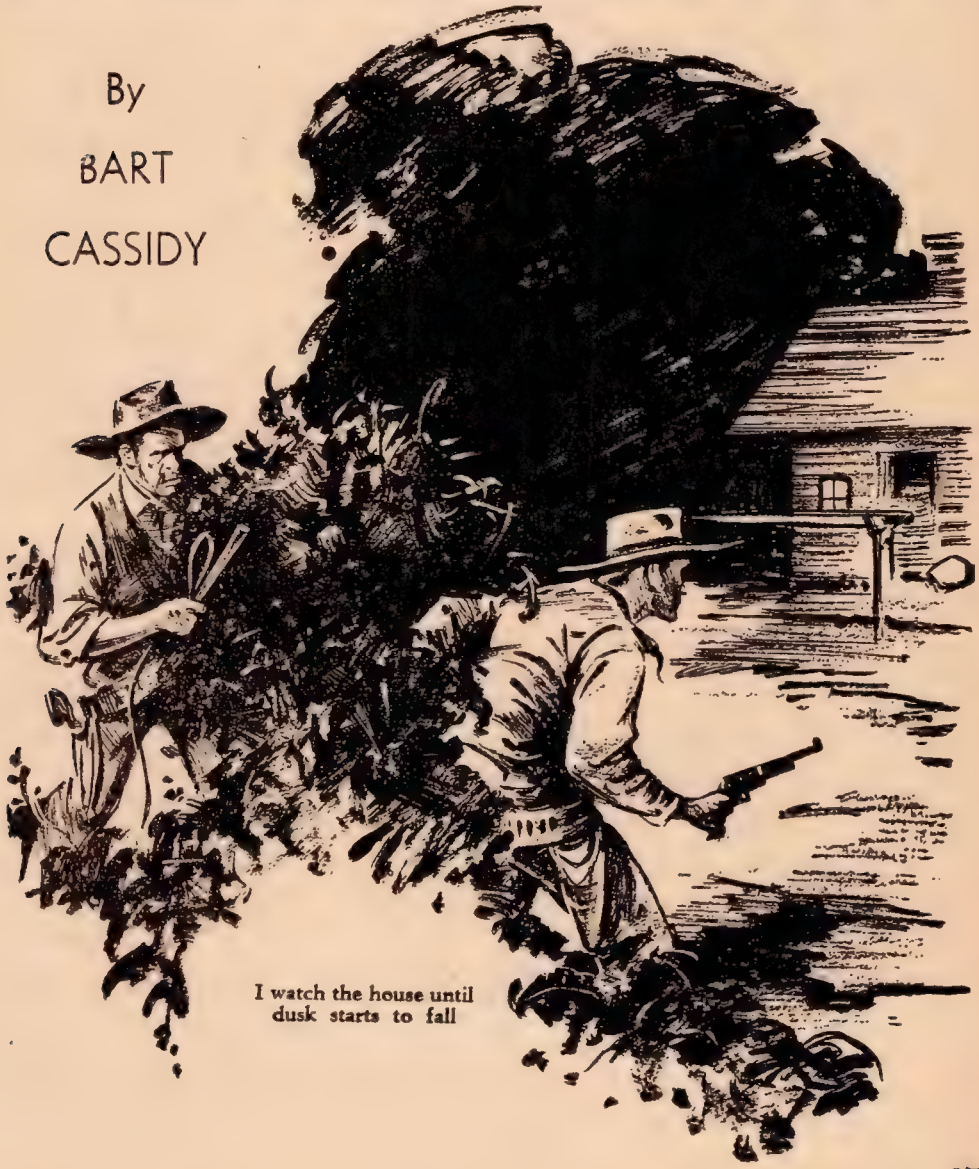
THE END

TENSLEEP and the HORSE-KILLER

Tensleep Maxon loved horses above all else—even more than his own reckless, rope-scarred neck!

By BART CASSIDY

TAKE it from a feller that knows, the's lots uh ways to be set afoot. I've bin bucked off an' come up with two handfuls uh cactus hairs. I've bin told by the Old Man to sack my saddle an' drag it offa his range. I've bin drug off, shot off, scraped off an' fell off while asleep. But only once was I con-



I watch the house until dusk starts to fall

vinced the Big Sky Boss set me afoot—that time on the Animas, thirty mile or so below Durango.

We'd had hell, me an' Hassan pony, shakin' our backtrail free of deadly danger, an' all because of an unfortunate employment. Hired, cheated, chased an' set afoot—all in a few long days. Whee-ew!

It all starts when I sign with the Flying M's, out of San Pablo, on the Dolores. I become one of a shifty-eyed, spiritless crew an', after a couple of weeks, it becomes double apparent I'm a slave under the eye an' the gun of the big ramrod, a ugly ape name uh Cash Vultura, called The Vulture behind his back. By askin' a few whispered questions, I learn the's men in this outfit that ain't drawed a dime in two years. An' The Vulture grinnin' at their fears, darin' 'em to demand their rights—or quit, both prohibited. It's that last that gets my neck up.

After riggin' Hassan, one evening after supper, I stomp into the boss'-office, bold as dammit. Thomas Wakefield Usher is a shy, meek little man, sorta mousy an' cringin' an' duck soup for a strong character like Vultura. He acts surprised that I want to quit, askin' about the food, the bunkhouse an' how do I like the boss? I scare him half to death, punctuatin' my demand for hurry with the black muzzle of a gun. An' just then Vultura walks in.

"I thought I told you," he says, nasty, "to come to me with your complaints."

"Oh, he wasn't complaining, Cash," pipes up Usher, meek. "He's heading south and wants his—"

"He's heading south to our round-up camp," busts in Vultura, savage, "if I gotta hogtie him an' rope him to a saddle. You hired as a tough hand, Jones, an' you're playin' out your string—"

"To the last wisp uh gunsmoke, Vultura," I interrupt, "if that's the kind of outfit you run here. I wear no man's leg irons."

"If that's the order," he smiles, "I'll fill it." An' then he goes for his gun.

With Usher yelpin' a shrill protest, I beat Vultura's time an' stretch him out on the office floor. An' when I walk outa there, Usher's got his hands high an' he's yellin' bloody murder that he ain't responsible fer no such high-handed doin's as Vultura started. Outside, the bunkhouse boys are lined up before their lighted doorway, starin' to see who comes outa that gun scrape. Not darin' to take a hand. Not darin' to call their souls their own. An' I remember the words of Pat Henry, I think it was . . .

"Freedom's hour has struck, boys!" I beller, "an' Ol' Man Usher's payin' off his cowhands!"

The last I see of 'em, as I fork Hassan an' spur outa there, they're dashin' madly to 'rds the office for their money. Me . . . nope, the story jist only just begun. How could I know that Vultura's brother-in-law was Sheriff Amon Childreth, of Dolores County? A gent who finds nothin quite so helpful around election time as a spirited manhunt, with politically-prominent gents ridin' in the posse.

It's a sad story, me outrunnin' Amon Childreth's eager posse. I expect the killin' to stir up a batch uh hell, but nothin' like it does. I take up the Dolores River, get myself tangled up in straight-up country an' get lined out, thanks to Maxon luck, with nothin' worse than the heart-rendin' cry of posse bullets—Sheriff Childreth's callin' cards. Hassan takes the high country like a bird, topping the backbone an' droppin' into the Vallecito. It's a rough go, part of it in white water, follering the canyon to its junction with the Pine.

WITH the town of Bayfield just ahead, I cut across the hills to the Animas, below Durango. Hassan's throwed a shoe an' he's limpin' bad. He hasn't rested or fed since leavin' the Flyin' M an' it hurts me to see him gantin' like he is. My belly's shrunk to the size of a beggar's

purse an I'm so sleepy I can't hold out much longer even if Hassan could. With Childreth an' his men a few scant miles behind, I turn Hassan into a hole in the brush an' pull it in after us. I pull the saddle, stake him where he's got grass an' water, stretch out an' fall asleep. To hell with Childreth!

I sleep the clock around. Dusk is fallin' again when I waken an' Hassan greets me with a nicker. He's full of grass an' water an' the rest has done his limp some good. The marks of Childreth's posse are everywhere around. How they missed us is a mystery, sure enough.

Half starved, I wolf a bait of ribs at an Indian's sheep camp, ride about twenty-five miles down the river an' bed down again in the bosky. Twice, before daybreak, Hassan paws at me where I'm layin'. Twice I drive him away. Come big daylight, I find him a-layin' outside my camp, dead from a bullet that took him in the side. When agony hit him, he come to me, the feller he depended upon for so much. An' I let him down.

I feel like bawlin', but somehow I can't. He was my pard, sure enough. He done me faithful all the way an' all I ever gave him was hard runnin' an' the life of a hunted animal. In spite of all, he loved me, something I can't say of another livin' critter. He's well out of it . . . an' me—I'm afoot, through some quirk of Fate, in a wilderness of enemies.

I'm too scairt an' worried to mourn much. I cache my saddle in the fork of a tree, say a brief an' final farewell to one of the best ponies I ever saw, an' start walkin'. Two things devil me the hardest. Did Hassan stop a bullet or did some gunnie deliberately shoot him? An' how can I hope to find another horse that can come anywhere near fillin' Hassan's shoes?

Avoidin' roads an' trails, my going is slow. I see riders on the road across the river now an' again, any one or all of which can be after my hide. Most of the time there's cattle around me, but nary a horse do I see. Near the end of about as tough a day as I can remember, I spot a house across the river—an' a span of work horses. Any ol' port in a storm, as the feller said. I'm gettin' food an' one of them ponies if it takes the business end of a persuader to earn 'em.

I watch the house till dusk starts to fall an' a light winks on in that ranch-house. I cross the crick an' I'm climbin' the brushy bank beyond when a face rises before me—I'll never forget that face—gaunt-eyed, high-boned, down-curved lips with a fringe of silky-brown hair all around. Snaggy teeth snarlin' an' yellow eyes. A nightmare face!

The lips draw back. "Just in time," it hisses, an' laughs as I stab for my equalizer. "You come right to me." A hand flashes up, freighted with the loaded butt of a reversed bullwhip stock. I swerve as I draw, but I'm too late by a country mile. He's leapin' at me, his club swingin'. I slip to one knee, throwing up my arm. Then fire is raging through my brain an' I remember nothing more.

* * *

Somebody's groans wake me up an' it's several minutes before I realize the somebody's me. Slowly, painfully, I get to my hands an' knees, the effort making me groan all the harder. Somewhere a light is gleamin', a spinnin' light that finally focuses down to lamp glow in a window. Running footsteps. A woman's frantic call. . . .

"Jeff, where are you? Answer me, Jeff. Are you hurt?"

I croak something, my brain still fuzzy, an' the next I know the woman's got me on my feet, half carrying me to'rds that light.

"Try hard," she encourages me. "It isn't much farther, then you can lie down while I bandage your head. I was so afraid it was Bud . . . my brother Jeff; that

something had happened to him. Step up now . . . that's it."

SOMEHOW, I make it into the house and stretch out on a bunk. For awhile I'm in and out, sorta half aware that she's spongin' off my head an' wrappin' it up. Then I'm wide awake, with a voice in my ears—the heavy voice of a man, dripping scorn. "'Tain't a bad yarn, bein'. set afoot by parties unknown an' then stumblin' onto the pony me and my boys are hunting. Yep, you make it sound convincing, but you'll have to dream up one with a lot solider argument . . , for the jury. . . ."

"Jury?" A pained voice answering. "You mean I'm arrested? For what? I've told you the truth; I never saw this horse till about five minutes ago. An' what about it? Why all the to-do about a spavined, half-foundered bronc run off at the legs?"

"Nothin' much," the lawman taunts, "except that the man who rode this bronc off at the legs led the robbery of the Farmington-Durango stage, killed the driver an' got off with the express box. I'll have to take you in, Randall."

The girl has stiffened, listening to the talk. Now she blats, "Bud!" bounces up an' dashes outside. "Sheriff Buck, you should be ashamed. Our father was your good friend, helped put you where you are. Now you repay his confidence in you by—"

"Hold on, Miss Effie," the lawman protests. "Friendship goes out the window where robbery an' murder move in. Milt Stocks, the dead driver, was your dad's friend too. And I find your brother standing in the road, holding the bridle of the stage robber's horse. I ain't tryin' him, you understand, just doin' my duty. He's going to need a air-tight alibi as to where he was about three, when that robbery taken place."

"And he's got it," rapped the girl spunkily. "He was right here at home with me. Hanging a new door on the barn. I'll swear to that. Besides, the rider of that horse was wounded in the head and I've got him inside, freshly bandaged."

Cripes! I don't wait for no more. Half dead one minute, I'm up an' oozin' out an open window the next. Four or five rods away, I hunker in a willow clump, listenin' to the sheriff an' his men stomp through that house, expressing interest in the bloody basin water, bloody rags an' clipped hair but unwilling to admit it's anything but a trick.

"I'm sorry, Miss Effie," the sheriff apologizes, "but I gotta take Jeff in. An' seein' you're a lone woman, I'll be happy to leave one of my deputies as a bodyguard for—"

"You do," rages the gal, "an' I'll fill him full of holes, so help me. You're horrid, all of you. Horrid. . . ." She busts into tears an' Jeff, her brother, is cussin' the posse as a gang of bunglers.

"While you mess around with me," he hollers, "the real owner of that horse is getting farther away. Go ahead, take me in. It won't buy you anything."

They take him away, without any further palaver, sped on by the bitter tongue-lashin' of Effie Randall. Me, I hide there, stung by the lonely gal's tearful sobs but in no wise tempted to comfort her with the thought that I'm the guilty party. When the hoof echoes are stilled, I crawl out an' approach the house. Effie's settin' at a table, her head pillowed on her arms, weepin' mournful. She hears me enter an' throws up her head.

"You?" she sniffles, scornful. "You accept my help and run out when you could have saved my brother. One word from you—"

"Wait!" I protest. "The word you're thinkin' of would have been a lie, miss. My pony was killed last night. I know nothin' about the critter you told 'em was

mine. I'm not puttin' my neck in a murder noose to save any gal's brother."

"Oh, I can't think straight," she wails. "I—I'll make some coffee."

She gets up, fumbles around in a cupboard an' comes out with a gun, cocked an' steady. "Lift your hands!" she clips, harsh. "I'm taking you to Sheriff Buck, in Aztec. There you'll confess you took Land Childreth's orders to rob the stage and plant that horse here to frame Bud . . . Jeff. Childreth promised to get this place at his own price when he'd broke us to harness, as he called it. Get your hands up, I say."

"Lady, please!" I blat. "You've got me wrong. I take no man's orders, robbed no stage an' framed nobody. I'm Tumbleweed Jones, the rollin' stone of the Montana Joneses. Did you say the man's name was Childreth? Any kin to the sheriff of Dolores County?"

"I—I don't know," she sighs, her eyes showin' she wants to believe me but dassent. "And I don't care. Don't try to change the subject. Acting innocent won't help you talk your way out of it. Keep those hands up! I'll take that gun."

SHE moves to'rds me, her eyes on my cutter. I hate to do it but I knock her to the floor by crowning her with my suddenly lowered hands. I step on her gun, pocket it an' lift her to her feet. "Hated to do that, ma'am, but I can't let you make fools of us both. You're like these sheriffs—they gotta have a victim. I think you know I'm not the stage robber."

"If you were innocent," she sobs, "you'd have nothing to fear from trying to clear this up with Sheriff Buck. I simply must get Bud out of jail. I'm all alone here and—"

"In the first place," I auger, "I can't go to Sheriff Buck because I'm wanted by the law an'—"

"An outlaw," she sneers. "And you ask me to believe in you. Hmmm." She moves to the open door to stare out into the night. "Bud and I must have been stark, raving crazy to think we could defy Childreth."

"Mebby not so crazy," I tell her. "Just how wide is that man across the britches? An' why is he so blood-sweatin' eager to have your place if he's so big?"

She turns to face me. "I've never told a soul," she says, "but now that you've asked, I'll tell you. Bud discovered silver ore on Lone Mountain, near our northeast corner. A Durango assayer says it runs twenty-five hundred to the ton. Bud filed on it as a mineral claim, even though we own the land, and—"

"The assayer!" I bust in. "That's how Childreth knows about your find. Many assayers sell information to gents with heavy pockets an' a yen for more money. If we beat Childreth, our first move is to peel that jail offa Bud so he—"

"And make him a hunted outlaw like yourself? Nothing doing. Bud will face this accusation and disprove it."

"Nice going if he can, miss. But don't hold your breath."

"You keep away from him," she rages. "I'm riding to town now to warn him against being influenced by anything you suggest about escaping." She darts outside an' minutes later I hear her ride from the barn. After I've cooked supper an' done the dishes, Bud's bed looks invitin'. So, against the wilder side of my nature, I dare to sleep an' forty sheriffs battlin' outlaws couldn't have wakened me.

Seems like I've only pillowed my head when I'm awakened by hoofbeats. Sun's two hours high an' Effie's just gettin' home, frayed lookin' an' tuckered. "I'd hoped," she snaps, when she walks in, "I'd never see you again. Haven't you cost Bud and me enough already?"

"Have I, ma'am? I'll gladly pay for the meal an' a night's lodging."

"Go far away. You're a black cat to our luck."

"What did the sheriff say, when you told him about me?"

"He thinks I'm making it up and he continues to punish Bud to make him confess. To make it worse, the robbers got a bank shipment and the bank has closed, They're talking lynch law in the saloons. I'm frightened."

"The game's old, ma'am," I tell her. "I'll bet the banker's in on the steal. Say the word and I'll get Bud where he'll be hunted rather than hung. While you think it over, I'll get breakfast."

I make her set, stir up batter, fry cakes an' boil coffee. Time it's ready, she's tidied up her hair an' looks prettier than last night. So pretty it gives a lonely, single man ideas about helpin' her. But with no horse an' no future, my dream dies sudden. No cabin for Tensleep, with a pretty wife fetchin' slippers to the hearthfire.

While we eat, I question her an' she answers eager. Her visit to town has killed her confidence in Sheriff Buck. Land Childreth, she says, is San Juan County's high cockalorum—commissioner, bank director, cattle broker, head of the Pure Government League. He's loaned money, acquiring nice holdings by foreclosure, livin' in style on the JOD's, above Farmington. He pays fighting wages, being scairt of his past, I reckon. A hard man to corner, he'll promise with a smile an' renege by principle.

Without rest, Effie droops after breakfast, needin' no coaxin' to bed down. I determine that her pony will carry me there an' back, then stretch out in the shade to snooze. Come sunset, I leave Effie still whooping up snore, throw a saddle on her *bayo coyote* an' light out for Aztec.

AFTER an unsatisfyin' restaurant supper, I visit the saloons, find 'em noisy enough but hardly hang-tree minded. Easier in my mind, I quit town, riding across dry hills to the San Juan an' down it to the JOD—a real show place. Cherokee roses on the high fence, blending their perfume with that of new mown alfalfa. A private drive winding from the arched entrance to the home buildings, between rows of overhanging box elders. Near that lane's end, I dismount an' turn Effie's pony loose to return to his home corral. When I ride from here, if at all, it'll be on a Childreth bronc.

Spurs off an' gun loose, I Injun to the painted buildings, where flowers are bloomin' an' a engine coughs out electricity for the house lights. Everything here except vigilance against dangers spawned by a misspent life.

At the corrals I get a surprise. Hipshot ponies, lots of 'em. The weary mounts of my Dolores posse! So Amon Childreth *is* kin to Land Childreth? A brother mebby. Talk buzzes in both long bunkhouses, where the possemen are layin' over an' hashin' howcome they lost me. Workin' careful, I open the gate an' ooze them broncs out, down the lane an' into the road. Back again, I enter the barn, findin' the stalls full of Childreth's high breds. One, in the last stall, with a blanket buckled around it.

The minute I enter this one's stall an' feed him sugar meant for poor Hassan, I know he's my horse. His legs are long, slender, straight, with powerful hams an' loins. His nose is pointed, his ears small. Round, shapely hoofs. Eyes wide apart. A struck match shows him to be light blue-gray, peppered with a million black flecks.

"Four years you've et the wrong man's oats," I whisper, strokin' his neck. "With me, you won't get the curryin' but you'll be free like the wild heron you take your color from." He nuzzles me, affectionate, an' from then on he's Heron.

I screw on Childreth's thousand dollar saddle, with thick Navajo blankets underneath, turn the other horses loose an',

leadin' Heron, herd 'em out the barn door. I'm not yet outside when a voice freezes me. "Who the hell let them critters out?"

The ponies swerve an' a form darts to the entrance, a match flarin'. An' there is my nightmare face again, the gent that poleaxed me below Effie's place. "You?" he croaks, surprised. "Settin' you afoot an' crackin' your skull didn't teach you nothin', eh?" His gun is comin' out, but this is my turn to be first. I smash my gun barrel into his ugly face an' both him an' his match goes out. I step over him, lead Heron out, tie him in the creek bottom an' move onto Childreth's porch. Talk stops inside when I rap and a heavy voice answers. "That you, Lizard?" An' when I grunt: "Well, bring the jug in, you dummy. What you waiting for?"

I open the door and step in. The two men, one standing, the other sitting, are dead ringers for one another except that the standing jigger is fresh an' the other one is ganted an' sunken-eyed from chasin' Missus Maxon's little Tensleep. Land Childreth is starin' at me. "Sa-a-ay, who are you? What you doing here? How'd you get past Lizard?"

"You slipped, Childreth," I grin, "when you had your Lizard bullet my Hassan pony, slug me an' plant me an' your brother's paint horse on those Randall kids. Want their mountain of silver pretty bad, don't you? Your second mistake was in not stirring up your dog robbers to lynch that Randall boy and slaughter his sister. . . ."

"By cripes, Land," breaks in Amon. "Sure as a .45, this is that Jones gunnie that murdered Vultura!"

Land sneers. "You'll be a fool all your life, Amon. If you were like me, never forgetting a face, you'd recognize Tensleep Maxon, the notorious horse thief, wanted for important money from Canada to Mexico. You've got a dozen dodgers on him in your office. So has Buck. Well, Tensleep, come here to run off my grullas, did you? A smart hombre, hey?"

"More than that, Childreth," I say, eyeing the cash—hard an' folding money—arranged in two neat piles on the table between them. "I see you've divided the Wells Fargo loot, which means your weasel brother has pulled a fast one. Who would suspect a tired sheriff, leading a posse in a manhunt, to take time out to rob a stage? An' who could suspect a leading citizen to swap a perfectly good blue ribbon horse for a foundered paint bronc? Nice figuring, fellas."

LAND'S grinning, his nerve admirable. "A lousy saddle tramp with a price on his head," he hums. "What do you want? And if you expect to get it, don't set your sights too high. How much to ride on and keep your mouth shut?"

"An' have your men follow and kill me, Childreth? I'm not that easy, fella. My price is double-barreled. The cash on that table an' your best horse so nobody can overhaul me. An' add this. If I hear of you plaguing the Randalls again, I'll return to settle with you. Want to deal on them terms, Childreth?"

The brothers swap a swift glance with understandin' in it. Land nods. "It's a deal, Tensleep. You leave us no choice. What you got to carry this in? It's heavy, you know."

"Oh, I'll tuck it into my shirt," I say, careless, an' step to'rds the stuff. I've no intention of doing anything of the sort but I think they're planning to kill me an' I want their try to be on my terms, in my good time. Land is making little clucking noises with his tongue. Amon is inchin' his hand to'rds his gun on the table. My eyes are on the mazuma but if ever I wasn't missin' a thing, it's now.

Like I figger, the break comes when I reach as if for Amon's pile. Amon yells, hurlin' himself to'rds his weapon. Land throws his right hand to'rds his Texas holster. He's fresh an' I gamble every-

thing on Amon's stringhalt born of weariness. Land's gun is out an' liftin' when I plug him in the belly. Amon, faster than I gave him credit for, is thumbin' his piece as I go to the floor. He misses an' that's it. My bullet takes him at the Adam's apple, dumping him for the long count.

I waste no time sentimentalizin' over a dead range hog who tried to railroad a plumb innocent man to the gallows. Or a sheriff who, failing in his quest, figgered to make his long jaunt pay off. I bounce up, untouched, rake the money into the two express specie bags, jerk the puckerin' strings an' ooze out the back as the JOD buckaroos storm in the front. Minutes later, I'm sendin' Heron across the hills, with them JOD'S an' possemen huntin' their horses feverish.

How that Heron pony flies. How easy his gait. If I'd had any doubts as to my choice, that ride dispels 'em. He loves to go an' he does an' I'm in his middle, his pard an' understandin' friend before we've covered five mile.

Reachin' the Randall spread, I find Effie up an' weepin'. She's glad to see me, that's plain. "When my pony came home with stirrups flapping," she sobs, "I thought you were dead or jailed."

"Me, I'm hard to tally," I tell her, pattin' her shoulder. "I sent your pony home when I got a better horse to ride. Now dry your eyes an' get on your bib an' tucker. We're paying a call on Sheriff Buck."

"Buck?" She acts startled. "What for?"

"To get him to turn Bud loose. Hurry up."

While she's readyin', I resaddle her horse an' presently we're lopin' to'rds Aztec. "That—that horse!" gasps Effie. "Land Childreth is the only one with those grullas around here. Isn't that his personal horse?"

"Was," I correct. "Mine now." I'm ashamed to tell her I've killed again. "If anybody asks about the bill-of-sale, refer 'em to my lawyer."

SHE'S frightened an' apprehensive an' swallers her curiosity. It's a silent ride to town, where she guides me to Sheriff Buck's house. It's dark. Long continued knocking gets him to the door in his night shirt. "What in tarnation you want at this hour?" he demands. "'Scuse me, Miss Effie; I didn't recognize you. Come into the parlor an' set while I get on some pants. Maw, make a light so's a body can see somethin'!"

He stumbles back into the house an' I enter behind him, strikin' a match an' makin' a light in the Buck parlor, where we wait till the sheriff shows up. His jaw sags when he sees them specie bags. "What you got there?" he demands. "Ain't them the bags that was took from the stage yestidday?"

"The same," I grin. "The man that recovered 'em thought it would make your office look better if you restored 'em to Wells Fargo. Don't you think so?"

"Yeah—er—why yes. Nice of him. But who was he? Miss Effie, who is this man an' what has been goin' on?"

"This is the man I told you about, Sheriff," she smiles. "The one that wasn't there."

"You mean . . . that is . . . yeah, the bandage an' everything." He looks flustered an' uncomfortable. "You persuade him to give himself up, Effie?"

"Me give myself up?" I hoot. "Please, Sheriff, let's talk sense. The men who should have give themselves up are lyin' on the floor of the JOD ranchhouse . . . dead! The money was between 'em, where they'd divided it. My friend sent it in to you."

"JOD!" Sheriff Buck looks stunned. "You mean Land Childers?"

"Him and his brother Amon, the

(Please turn to page 130)

A railroad would cross the mountains—a bloody Indian war would be averted—and Captain Bradley might see his wife again, if he could keep a . . .

TWO-FACED PROMISE

By BILL GULICK

CAPTAIN Thaddeus Bradley, engineer in charge of the survey party, was in his tent writing a letter to his wife when the lanky, saturnine-faced scout, Steve Conners, appeared in the entryway and said, "The Indians are waiting."

Captain Bradley laid aside his pen, donned his hat and followed the scout across the camp to where the saddled horses waited. Mounting, they forded the shallow river and rode across an open park where the grass grew rich and green,

He found George Joslyn as daylight was fading from the sky

Conners slouching loose and relaxed in the saddle, Bradley holding his short, stocky figure stiffly erect to ease the dull throb of pain in his right side. It was nearly noon. The late September sun stood straight overhead, warm even at that high altitude, and veiling cedar and pine on the upper slopes of the foothills in a translucent haze. Silence rode with the two men for a while, then the captain said, "Can we trust him?"

"Maybe." Conners lifted his shoulders in a shrug. "Chief Qualchee is an educated Indian. Mission school. But that doesn't guarantee anything. Some Indians don't learn how to lie till white men teach 'em." The scout gave Bradley a quizzical look. "How does he strike you?"

The captain considered for a moment. Problems of engineering could be measured by the tangible yardstick of facts, but long ago he had learned that men must be measured by less tangible things —a gesture, a tone of voice, a quiet glitter of the eye.

He said slowly, "As a man who has the best interests of his people at heart."

"That," Conners said dryly, "puts us right back where we were."

"You think the only feasible pass is to the southwest?"

"It's big country. I could be wrong."

The implication was clear enough: there might be other passes through the mountain range to westward, but Conners did not regard it as likely. The captain knew that Conners was a man whom years in the West had taught caution. That was at once a virtue and a fault. The captain's thoughts started circling again, like a terrier chasing its own tail. The final decision must be his own. The matter resolved itself to this: Either Chief Qualchee was to be trusted or he was not. It was as simple and yet as difficult as that.

Thaddeus Bradley was a man driven by a single dream. For years he had fought an indifferent Congress, a skeptical President and an openly hostile Secretary of War in a stubborn and continuing battle to make that dream a reality—and in the end he had won the grudging victory of a small appropriation and a commission to lead a survey party westward from Saint Paul to Puget Sound. The money was spent now and no hope of getting more. The men were weary and disgruntled. He was tired. An old injury suffered in the Mexican War had returned to plague him and make every minute in the saddle torture, but the job was nearly done. With the early mountain winter weeks away, only a single rugged range lay between the party and its goal. But railroads did not climb mountains. Somewhere there had to be a pass, a low, gentle-grade pass relatively free of snow, or the entire survey was worthless.

He thought of the commission which had been given him months before. ". . . empowered to search out the most feasible northern route for a railroad to the West; to treat with the Indian tribes encountered and set aside lands for them to the end that permanent peace may be insured . . ." It was a bit of irony that the only known pass through the mountains lay in a country jealously claimed by one of the strongest Indian tribes in the West. Well, the wording of the commission made the choice simpler. The railroad came first; peace, second.

The Indians were camped at the edge of the park a few miles south of the river. Chief Qualchee waited, a tall impassive man whose dignity clothed his powerful body with a quiet grace that no white man's raiments could ever have achieved. Dismounting, Captain Bradley studied him as they went into the council lodge, seated themselves and commenced the long ceremony of pipe-smoking which always preceded important discussions, trying to read whatever truth was in him.

"You brought the paper?" the Indian

said at last, staring straight at Bradley.

"I have it here in my hand. Do you wish it read to you?"

Qualchee waved it away. "The white man's words always stand on straight legs but sometimes the hand that writes them lies."

"My words and my hand are one."

The Indian inclined his head slightly. "Good. Then the bargain is done. South of where the river runs—this shall be our land, as it always has been. When the beast that spits fire comes, it will not eat our land. It will turn northward and cross the mountains at the place I have agreed to show you."

"There is a pass to the northwest?"

"I have said it."

Captain Bradley's eyes went to Conners' face and found it stony, expressionless. Whom was a man to believe? A white scout who admitted that his knowledge of the country was limited? A partly civilized savage who might best serve his people by lying?

He said quietly, "We will sign the treaty."

THEY had recrossed the river and were riding into camp before Conners spoke. His eyes probed the irregular horizon line to the northwest. "Winter comes early in the mountains. If the pass ain't there, there'll be no turning back."

The jolting of the saddle had made the pain in Captain Bradley's side start throbbing again, a pulsing, tearing pain that forced him to breathe in shallow gasps. "I know," he said shortly.

He called the men together and spoke to them briefly. "I've signed the treaty. From now on the land south of the river belongs to the Indians. I want no trespassing—for any reason. Qualchee has promised to join us tonight. We'll start for the mountains tomorrow."

Afterwards, he went to his tent and rested on his cot for an hour. When the pain had lessened somewhat, he arose and went back to the unfinished letter to his wife, which he planned to give to the expected army dispatch rider from the east who was due that afternoon. He read over what he had written, then picked up his pen.

. . . I signed the treaty with the Indians today. Perhaps it was a mistake. I'm sure Conners thinks so and I'm sorry for that, for he is the only man in the party who seems to be in sympathy with what I am trying to do. It was not an easy decision to make. If the best pass lies in Indian country south of the river, then that is the route the railroad should take—even if it means war. But the die is cast. Qualchee says that there is an easier and better pass to the northwest. I am risking the success of the entire project on the supposition that he is a man of honor. If his word is good . . .

He heard a horse clatter into camp and the voices of men raised in greeting. A moment later the dispatch rider, a slight, wiry figure with dust powdering the blue of his faded uniform, appeared in the doorway of the tent. He saluted, then handed the captain a packet of letters.

"You'll start back as soon as you eat?" Captain Bradley said.

"I'll wait till dark. Too many Indians around to suit me."

"They're peaceful."

"Perhaps, sir. But I'll still wait till dark."

Captain Bradley thumbed quickly through the letters, putting aside those from his wife and saving them until he had finished what was bound to be more unpleasant reading. The official letters contained the usual complaints. The government would honor no more drafts for supplies and pack animals and he would be held personally responsible for any

further debt incurred. Sentiment in Congress was changing, swayed by the fiery, eloquent Secretary of War, Jefferson Davis, who, being a Southerner, favored the southern transcontinental route for the railroad. It was thought that a compromise might be reached and a central route through the Rockies decided upon. This, Captain Bradley thought angrily, despite Fremont's abysmal failure to penetrate those mountains in his expedition of a few years ago!

A shadow filled the tent doorway and he looked up to see the thick figure of George Joslyn, one of the party's civilian teamsters. "What is it?" the captain said impatiently.

Joslyn was a heavy, morose man, slow of thought and action, a man drawn into himself by a secret dream that set him apart from the others. He did the job he was paid to do but no more; whatever free time he had to himself he spent in pursuing the will-o-the-wisp of his private dream. That dream was gold.

AS PART of his personal effects, he had brought along from Saint Paul a miner's pan, a pick and a short shovel, and each time the party crossed a likely looking stream he somehow found a moment to dig a few shovelsful of sand, squat by the water's edge and test it. The other men had been interested at first, then, as his efforts showed little result and they learned the unpleasant fact that prospecting for gold was hard work, the interest gave way to amusement, and, finally, to indifference—none of which affected George Joslyn in the least. He continued to search, to dig, to dream.

There had been a time when Captain Bradley had cherished the hope that Joslyn would make a strike. Gold would bring people west. Gold would assure the success of the northern railroad route. Gold would pay the mounting deficit of the survey party—a deficit which now promised to make him a pauper. But time was running out, and the only gold he sought now was the hope that somewhere to the northwest he would find the vital pass.

"Captain," Joslyn said with blunt directness, "I'm quitting. I'm not going on with the party."

"The word," Bradley said quietly, "is deserting."

"Call it what you want, I'm through."

"You have a reason, I suppose?"

"If I do, it's my own affair."

Bradley gazed up at the man, trying to read what lay behind the uncomfortable, dogged expression in the heavy face. At last he said, "I'm busy now, Joslyn. I'll talk to you later."

His face was troubled for a moment after the man had gone, then it softened as he opened and read the letters from his wife, letters written months before and a wide continent away. They were cheerful letters for the most part, but here and there a phrase crept in that brought worry to his eyes.

. . . . a hard winter here in Massachusetts. The snow still lies deep in the hill pasture and feed for the cattle is scarce . . . Esther has a bad cough. I'm sure it will be all right when spring comes, but, oh, it's so long in coming . . .

He looked up from the letter and his eyes found the mellow sunlight sparkling on the clear surface of the river and the lovely park beyond. He thought of the vast, empty stretches of fertile park and meadow and wide reach of plain he had crossed since leaving Saint Paul, good land needing only the touch of the plough to make it productive. Then he thought of the bleak New England hills where he had been born and the stone-cluttered valleys which farmers tilled so frugally during the few months of the growing season. Tired, worn-out, sour land.

He sat for a long while gazing out

across the camp, then he picked up the pen and started writing again.

The dispatch rider just brought half a dozen letters from you. I can't tell you how welcome they are. Though I know you're doing your best to conceal it, I can sense that you're worried and discouraged. I know the farm is poor. I know that it's hard to live on what little money I am able to send you, but if you can bear up a little longer my job here will be done, then I will come for you. You ask if this is not a terribly lonely land. At the moment it is, my dear, but it will not be long. When the railroad is built—as it surely will be—the people will come and the land will prove fruitful as that of the East never has. This is land of great promise . . .

He wrote steadily on while the afternoon sun moved slowly across the sky toward the jagged blue line of peaks on the western horizon.

AN HOUR before sunset he stopped writing and got up and went out of the tent. Men sprawled about the camp, dozing and talking and waiting hungrily while the cook prepared the evening meal. Seeing Conners, the captain said, "Has Qualchee come?"

"No."

"He promised to be here by dark."

"What's his promise worth?"

So Conners has lost faith too. The feeling of being completely alone made the captain look at the scout with a rising anger, then the anger died and became resigned acceptance. No words could inspire faith when the willingness to believe was gone. "Have you seen Joslyn?" he said shortly.

"Couple of hours ago. He was headin' toward the river with his pick an' shovel an' pan. Guess he's gone pokin' around in the hills."

Captain Bradley frowned. He walked down to the river and stood on the north bank for a time, thinking of Joslyn and his morose, stubborn dream. Growing apprehension came to him. He picked his way across the river on the flat boulders, searched for a moment along the south bank and presently found the clear, deep print of a boot in the moist sand. His sign. It led south across the park, south into forbidden land toward the rising foothills, which were turning blue now with growing dusk.

"The fool!" he muttered. "The damned fool!"

* * *

He found George Joslyn just as the last pale glow of daylight was fading from the sky. He found him in the bend of a

stream a few miles south of the river—lying still and unmoving on his face with the chill water gurgling around him and an Indian hunting arrow protruding from the center of his back. He had not been dead long, for his body was not yet stiff, but the quiet murmur of the stream, the still rustle of pine on the slope above, told no tales of how he had died or whose hand had bent the bow.

Captain Bradley turned the body over on its side, staring with fascination at the sharp, barbed point protruding from beneath the breast bone and the red, green and white feathers bound to the arrow's notched end. He stood up. Near-by lay the pick, the shovel and the miner's pan Joslyn had carried across half a continent. In a sandbar not far away was a fresh excavation, and just beyond Joslyn's outstretched arm lay a buckskin bag, half full of a substance that gleamed dull yellow as Captain Bradley poured it out in his hand.

He stood for a long while staring down at the nuggets in his palm. George Joslyn had made his strike at last. There was no doubt of that. Gold. Nugget gold. That meant that somewhere near-by lay a vein capable of enriching many men. Capable of turning a nation's eyes west.

A coyote on the crest of the hill lifted his lonely cry into empty space; after a while an answering wail floated back through the gathering twilight. Slowly Captain Bradley tilted his hand and let the gold spill out. He upended the buckskin sack and threw it into the water. Stooping, he picked up gold pan, shovel and miner's pick and tossed them far back into the forest. Then, without a glance at the dead man, he limped slowly downstream. Once he paused, thinking he had heard a small movement in the shadows of the hillside above him; he listened for a moment, and then, hearing nothing, gave a brief laugh and walked on.

FULL darkness had fallen by the time he reached camp. "Find Joslyn?" Conners asked.

"Joslyn," the captain said, "has deserted."

He went to his tent, lit a candle and sat down to finish the letter to his wife. He had been writing for only a few minutes when he was aware of a quiet step outside. He looked up to see the tall figure of Chief Qualchee standing in the entryway of the tent.

"I am here," the Indian said.

He held a blanket wrapped about him against the growing chill of night. Captain Bradley gazed silently at him for a while, then he said, "You will lead us to the pass?"

Perhaps it was the captain's imagination again, but he thought a brief glint illumined the dark eyes, a wordless communication that pierced all barriers of race and color and showed him the soul of Qualchee. The Indian said softly, "Would Qualchee speak with a forked tongue and let the straight words of the white man shame him?"

Then he was gone and the entryway lay black and empty. The captain stared at the spot where the Indian had stood. There on the dusty ground lay a hunting arrow. The captain picked it up. The head was sharp and barbed. The feathers bound to the notched end were red, green and white.

Captain Bradley shivered and gingerly laid the arrow on the improvised desk across his knees. He picked up his pen, chewed thoughtfully at its end for a moment and then, the faintest ghost of a smile touching his lips, started writing.

. . . Qualchee came, as he promised he would. He says he will lead us to the pass tomorrow. Somehow I have confidence that he will. He impresses me as a man of honor. . . .

It took Mingo's very special kind of courage to win . . .

A LETTER FROM THE MARSHAL

His long fingers smoothed the pink back of a card. Even sitting, he looked tall

By C. HALL THOMPSON

MINGO walked quietly through the dusty moon-washed street. Prescott was a wide open town. Ponies caked with trail grit and lather slept at the hitch racks. The sidewalk rattled under hurrying boots. Spent mule teams stood outside the smithy; a lot of the wagons had big letters painted across the canvas: TOMBSTONE OR BUST. Mingo passed a knot of miners talking about a fresh silver vein just west of Tombstone. He did not stop to listen.

Easy he walked, medium high and bone-thin with swivel hips and eyes that were older than twenty. His arms hung wide, swinging, his right hand just over the butt of a thigh-thonged Colt. Noisy people shouldered past. He did not notice. Once, in the clapboard shadows, a girl's voice said, "Got a light?" He took a match out of the picketfence along his hatband. The girl bent to the flame, touching his hand; she wore a red feather boa and too much rouge. She smiled. "Kind of lonesome for you in a strange. . . ."

It trailed off. She saw the hard-drawn lines of his face and paleness under the burn of Arizona sun. Mingo flicked out the match and walked on, his boots striking hollow sounds from the boards, the gun riding with his stride, brushing his fingertips.

Ahead, the saloon blazed light like an All Hallow's pumpkin.. Men lounged under the tin awning, shouting about silver above the nasal roll of a pianola. A ropy soprano sang with sugartears in her voice. Mingo paused, staring at the fresh

scar where a bullet had raked across the batwing doors. He frowned. Then he squared off and drew a deep breath.

Inside, he stood with his back to the doors, his hand still held wide, the fingers flexing slowly. The place smelled of sawdust. Smoke shifted under green-shaded lamps that swayed idly. The whiskey-soprano kept crying over the song. At the rear was a row of tables under white lamplight, felt-topped and dappled with a spill of red and blue chips. Men sat quiet, waiting, listening to the snick of the cards.

Watching the tables, Mingo walked to the bar. The barkeep was squat with pomaded hair plastered over his bald spot. "What's your pleasure, kid?"

Mingo watched the table. "Whiskey."

The barkeep brought it. Mingo spun a coin on the polished oak.

"You had a fracas here tonight."

"We had a lot of them."

"Early tonight," Mingo said. "A big redhead named Shaw. Too much money and liquor under his belt. You recollect?"

The barkeep frowned. "I got no mind for names and faces."

"You recollect. He lost eight hundred bucks at poker. He tried to get it back. Somebody put a bullet hole in his shoulder."

A rag moved nervously on the bar. "I got a respectable place. Somebody loses, he pays."

"If he loses honest," Mingo said.

The rag stopped wiping.

Mingo straightened away from the bar. "Who was Shaw playing with?"

The barkeep looked sick. "Go home, kid. You could lose a lot more than eight hundred."

Mingo said, "Which one?"

The barkeep didn't meet Mingo's stare. Finally he said, "Table in the corner."

Mingo looked across the shifting smoke-layers. "The one in the black coat?"

The barkeep nodded. "But, listen. . ."

Mingo had started for the corner.

"Listen, kid! A man's crazy to mix with. . ."

Mingo didn't stop.

The music did. Drinkers turned at the barkeep's loud tone; the soprano went sour and stared. It was quiet. Men sat still, watching the loose swing of Mingo's arms, the way he walked with the weight of him set and ready. A dancing girl laughed too shrilly.

Three of the players at the corner table had turned, frowning at Mingo. The man in the black coat did not look up. His long fingers smoothed the pink back of a card. Even sitting, he looked tall; very thin and pale. He had nothing at all in his gray eyes. His linen was perfect and there was no dust on the coat. The bulge under the left armpit was too big for a Colt; it was more like a shoulder-slung sawed-off shotgun. Once, he coughed behind a very white kerchief. It was a harsh sound that raked his lungs.

MINGO stopped in front of the table. The three players looked at him. A heavy-set miner chewed his cigar too hard. In a soft Virginia drawl, the man in the black coat said, "How many?"

The miner kept looking at Mingo. "I'm out," he said thickly.

The man in the black coat smiled, turning to the next player. "Cards, sir?"

Mingo felt sweat run down his ribs; his gun arm did not relax.

He said, "I want to talk to you."

The gambler looked at the players. "Cards, gentlemen?"

The saloon crowd had drawn back from the corner. Shag smoke hung gray and nearly motionless in the silence. The men at the table shifted.

"I guess I'm clean."

"Deal me out, Doc. . . ."

Chairs scraped loudly. The green-shaded light swung gently and in its glare the gambler sat alone. He raked in

the pot. His smile pulled skin tight over features, making them smooth and refined.

Softly, he said, "Competition's poor tonight."

Mingo watched the pale fingers make neat red and blue chip piles. His throat was dry; he looked suddenly very young.

"Shaw's my brother," he said.

The chips clicked. Finally the gray eyes came up; the easy, gentleman's tone did not change. "Your brother is an unlucky poker hand, sir. I trust he's luckier in love."

"He lost eight hundred. I want it back."

The smile thinned. "You're young. I'll tell you the facts of life. Grown-ups play for keeps."

Mingo felt his neck go red. Somebody said, "Don't be a damn fool, kid." But Mingo let the words out slow and clear. "You used a cold deck on him."

The man in the black coat rose deliberately. The singer stifled a scream. White hands hooked on velvet coat lapels, not far from the bulge under the left arm. Standing, he seemed taller yet and his face was the color of dead desert salt under the sun.

Mingo tensed.

All the gambler said was, "Go away." He turned and walked to the bar, his back to Mingo.

Mingo said, "You fleeced him. You shot him when he tried to get it back."

The gambler kept walking. At the bar he poured a drink. He drank it. Without turning, he said, "Shaw called me names, too. Bad manners run in the family."

Mingo's gunhand ached. Once he glanced toward the doors, the cool, safe darkness beyond; But you're here, his mind said, and here you stay. Walk out now and they laugh. The way folks back home used to laugh at the notion of little Mingo Shaw wearing a badge. A would-be lawman that couldn't outface an ordinary tinhorn cardsharp! They'll laugh you clear out of town. Only, "ordinary" didn't quite fit this tall black stranger . . . Mingo frowned, shutting out thought. "Turn around," he said.

The tall man poured another drink.

"I've seen your kind take drunks," Mingo said. "Happen, someday, with a badge, I can do something about it. But, badge or no badge, Shaw and me figured to stake a claim at Tombstone. We need that money. I'll get it however I can."

The gambler had the glass halfway to his lips. He set it down. "I'm real thin, boy. Almost too thin to hit."

Mingo stood in the center of the floor, his left arm free, ready. "Turn around."

The man in the black coat stood still. Only his hand moved, upward along the velvet lapel. The barkeep said, "God!"

A strange voice said, "Forget it!"

THE WHITE hand stopped short. Mingo kept his eyes on the gambler. The other man came unhurried down the aisle that opened in the crowd. He came like a mountain cat, almost without sound, his blue-gray eyes expressionless in a long, quiet face. A tawny drooping mustache hid the strength of jaw and mouth. A star rode his vest.

The man in the black coat smiled. His hands did not relax.

"I'd be pleased to oblige, kid; but you heard the marshal's orders."

Somebody laughed as if it was all settled. It wasn't.

Mingo said, "My brother and me tore up old roots because they said a man could find something better in Tombstone. We still got a long piece to go. We can't do it without fresh mules and supplies." He eyed the gambler. "I don't figure to lose a new life to a fixed deck."

Nobody answered. The marshal watched Mingo, a slow-growing recognition in his level stare. The man in the black coat would have turned away. Mingo's gun-

(Please turn to page 127)

RENEGADE OF

(Copyright 1935 by Popular Publications, Inc.)

"Yellow!" was the word for jailbird Donnigan, from the line-camps of his enemies to his own bunkhouse. Could he win back his once proud place on that sneering, unbending range by showing courage enough—*not* to fight?

Thrilling Novel
of High Adventure
on the Range

BITTER VALLEY

By

T. T. FLYNN

Before Roaring Bill knew what was happening, steel clubbed his head

CHAPTER ONE

A Neck for a Noose

BLOOD oozed down Donnigan's arm as they held him on Buff Creed's horse and lowered the noose around his neck. Buff Creek stood on the ground in the firelight and looked directly at the prisoner.

"If you care tuh talk, Donnigan," he said harshly, "before we swing you off tuh hell, spit it out!"

Creed's sharp, stubble-covered face glistened in the wavering light of the hastily-built fire. Creed had climbed the tree, tossed the rope over the limb and slid down yelling for the men to get the prisoner on the horse. Now Creed wiped his red bandanna across his face and scowled as he waited for a reply.

Donnigan ducked his head and wiped blood out of his left eye with his shoulder. More blood seeped down from the crease through his black hair. The bullet, ricocheting from the side of the cabin window, had come close to killing him. Not that it mattered much—with this hanging following it.

From the saddle, Donnigan looked down at the men who had come with Buff Creed. They stood uncertainly, holding their rifles. Only Dave Greenwood was on his horse a few yards away. The end of the hanging rope was dallied around Greenwood's saddle-horn.

Greenwood wasn't looking as if he particularly enjoyed the job. His own rope hung on his saddle. Buff Creed's rope ran over the limb and down to Donnigan's neck. And Creed himself had tied the crude hangman's knot which bulked under Donnigan's left ear.

Creed had yelled, "I been in at the fixin' of half a dozen hoss thieves an' killers no better'n this one! Here's my rope tuh hang him—an' I'll tie the knot! Get it over quick before some smart lawyer has him ridin' out a free man, thumbin' his nose at us!"

Creed's rasping voice had swayed them with that. Now they stood with the firelight dancing on their faces, intent on the moment when Greenwood's horse would snatch the body into the air.

Donnigan visualized it clearly. If he was lucky, his neck would be broken in the first savage jerk. If not—he'd have a bad time of it for a few minutes. Any way you got it, the end was the same.

Donnigan's hands, with the cutting rawhide thongs about his wrists, were resting on the saddle-horn. Creed had evidently not thought it worth while to tie them behind. Numbness was creeping above the thongs. In a way the numbness was welcome. It dulled the pain of the bullet wound high in Donnigan's left arm.

Creed had fired that bullet when he first kicked open the door of the log cabin and saw Donnigan jumping from the table with his gun coming out. Creed had fired and dodged back. Donnigan had knocked over the candle, dived to the door and slammed it against the storm of lead which had blasted at him a moment later.

They would still have been laying siege to the cabin if that other bullet had not ricocheted and creased Donnigan. Now the bright stars were winking overhead and the noose was around his neck.

Creed spoke again: "Last chance, Donnigan! Yuh got anything to say? Not that it'll help yuh any. Yo're guilty as hell an' yo're swingin'!"

DONNIGAN grinned mirthlessly. Some of the men there on the ground looked away from his face in that moment. Donnigan knew them. Lariat Jenkins, who owned the small Circle L spread down the valley; Nat Thompson, who drove the stage now and then when old Henry Hicks took time off to go fishing. There were others, too.

Once they had been friendly. Now blood-hunger darkened their faces.

Donnigan drew a deep breath. Lord, how good the crisp night air felt! He'd never paid much attention to it before.

Donnigan spoke to Creed. His voice had a bitter lash. "I reckon you'll hang me, Creed. You'll hang me up an' leave me here for buzzard bait. I don't know what's behind this. Today I got back from the pen where I spent three years for

the dirty rustlin' some low-down skunk wouldn't admit. I came back to find my partner dead, my cows run off, my fences down. And while I was sittin' in there under my own roof, tryin' to figure it all out, you kicked the door in, Creed, an' cut loose with your gun. Why do you want me dead, Creed?"

"Hold on!" Creed replied angrily. "Don't make out like I got it in for yuh, Donnigan! I never liked yuh—but I let it go at that. But when it comes tuh a man like Deacon Tetweiler gettin' shot down in cold blood, then I'm takin' the lead in swingin' the killer tuh the first handy limb. Any decent citizen'd do the same. Ain't that right, men?" Creed looked around for confirmation. His manner was aggressive.

Behind him a quick voice backed him up. "You're right, Buff. We're all with yuh. Hang 'im quick—an' men'll be able to ride out after dark without gettin' their heads blowed off!" That was Bert Willis, who owned the small XT spread above Creed's land.

Donnigan gritted, "So Deacon Tetweiler's dead? An' you're hangin' me for it? How come you didn't ask me any questions? After I'm buzzard bait, I won't be able to deny it."

"What's the use o' talkin'?" Creed snapped impatiently. "Plenty of folks seen Deacon Tetweiler stop him on the street in Bitter Forks this afternoon an' warn him the better folks didn't favor his brand of orneriness back in the valley again. Plenty of 'em heard Donnigan tell the Deacon there'd be trouble if he was bothered. An' Donnigan was seen galloping down the Crippled Spring road a little after the Deacon drove his buggy that way. Donnigan, yuh killed old man Tetweiler, took the money he'd drawed outta the bank and cached it somewheres. Yuh was busted an' had tuh get a stake. Swing him up, boys! Ride off with that rope, Greenwood!

Creed looked at Dave Greenwood. The others looked also, to see the jerk of the rope. And Donnigan, who had been sitting bitter and watchful, whipped his bound hands to the left side of his neck.

The fingers still had enough life to grip the bulky hangman's knot and shove it up on the rope. As Dave Greenwood spurred hard and his horse leaped forward. Donnigan ripped the noose up over his head and let it fly free into the air.

With a mighty lunge forward Donnigan caught the ground-tied reins, brought them up on one side and drove his heels hard. The horse bolted forward through the watchers.

"Look out, boys!" Willis squawled.

Creed whirled. The horse struck his shoulder and knocked him to one side. The other men scattered, too astonished to think of their guns.

Past the leaping fire Donnigan drove Creed's big gray horse, and on into the

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black shadows beyond. Yells rose behind him. A gun barked. The bullet whistled close as Donnigan crouched forward. Other guns blasted against the night back there.

But the fire glare was in their eyes. Donnigan and the horse were only a bolting shadow vanishing into the darkness.

Past the cabin Donnigan rode, catching one rein in his teeth, flipping the other before the horse's head to its rightful side.

Lead was still whanging through the darkness after him. He swung the horse over, put the cabin behind him, and sent the animal slashing through the thicket behind the cabin into the Tumbleweed trail.

THEY followed, of course. One man would be afoot—but it wouldn't be Buff Creed. He would be in at the kill. Donnigan's lips drew apart in another mirthless smile. There would be no kill tonight. Matt Donnigan, ex-convict, bankrupt rancher, outcast of Bitter Valley, would go on to throw the lie in their teeth.

A mile up the side of Tumbleweed Mountain the pines rose thick and straight and the silver aspens gleamed like ghostly rods in the white moonlight. Donnigan heard the pound of pursuit not far behind on the trail. Creed was leading them furiously to the kill.

He could leave the trail, but the noise it would make would bring them fast. He needed distance, and he wasn't gaining. Two miles more and the trail rounded Squaw Rock, angling south up Squaw Canyon. Donnigan hitched the reins on the saddle-horn, swung his leg over the horse's neck and made a flying drop.

Creed's big bay raced on. Donnigan shouldered down Squaw Canyon slope in great leaps, fighting through the tangled growth. He was crouching silently far down the slope when the pursuit rounded Squaw Rock and kept on up the trail.

When the last man had passed, Donnigan smiled thinly and went on down to the tumbling waters of Squaw Creek. He plunged his swollen wrists in the cold current, wetting the rawhide thoroughly. He drank quickly and waded hastily down the rocky bed.

Donnigan waded for a quarter of a mile, then struck up the opposite side of the canyon through the pines again. He traveled slantwise across the mountain's face, bearing upward steadily through the virgin forest. The wind soughed overhead. Unexpected noises in the dark gave notice other life was astir also. A bobcat screamed eerily near-by. Far down toward Bitter Valley coyotes raised shrill, yapping clamor against the stars.

Miles farther on, Donnigan struck the upper reaches of Copper Creek. He went down on his stomach and drank deep, and then squatted by the water and soaked his wrists again. After a bit he got the thongs off.

He was tired. His head had stopped bleeding, but warm blood still trickled down his arm. Creed's bullet had torn a big hole through the upper muscles. Constant movement was keeping it open. Pain was there, too, but Donnigan ignored that as he splashed across the six-foot width of Copper Creek and went on with long, space-eating strides.

In all the Bitter Valley country there was only one place now where he was certain of safety. He had to get to that spot before the new day brought eyes abroad which might spot him.

Hour after hour, mile after mile, Donnigan strode on, gaining altitude steadily. The air thinned; grew colder. His chest heaved to the hunger of his pounding heart. Fatigue blotted his strength. Blood still trickled down his left arm. Two years in the state prison did not fit a man for a grueling, night-long walk up slopes which never ended. Nor did a lifetime of saddle

work build legs for this sort of travel.

The true gray dawn bloomed overhead. Gold and scarlet streamers of sunrise thrust over Tumbleweed peaks. A buck deer sprang out of a covert and streaked away. A turkey called near-by. Later, an outlaw steer which had wandered high up away from its kind, surged to its feet and snorted away.

The blazing sun was sliding over Tumbleweed peaks when the sharp report of a rifle not far ahead brought Donnigan to a sudden stop.

DONNIGAN listened. Just that one shot was fired. But a dog began to bark, and a slow smile of weary satisfaction broke across Donnigan's face. He stumbled on.

Donnigan was walking without regard to noise when a silent figure materialized uncannily ahead of him. The man carried a rifle. Long uncut hair hung from under a battered old hat. The face was seamed, weathered, impassive. A lank, spotted dog came forward stiff-legged, questing the air with its nose. The dog suddenly barked once, sharply.

Donnigan called thickly, "Your eyes goin' back on you, Joe?"

"By damn!" Indian Joe replied, shifting his rifle to the crook of his arm and coming forward. "I don't know you, hey, Donnigan? My eyes, she ain't so good, eh?"

Indian Joe was grinning broadly as he put out a lean, hard hand. But concern appeared on his face as he looked at Donnigan's blood-caked arm, and stared into Donnigan's gaunt, weary face.

"Where you hoss?" Indian Joe demanded quickly. "You have trouble, hey?"

Donnigan grinned while the dog sniffed at him and wagged an approving tail. "Hard to tell where my hoss is now," Donnigan replied. "I walked here, Joe."

Indian Joe clucked unbelievingly, patted his rifle barrel with a questioning look.

Donnigan nodded. "That's right, Joe. I'm in a heap of trouble. I got back from the pen yesterday, an' before I could get asleep I was shot up an' high-tailin' it ahead of guns. They're lookin' for me now, Joe. I figured if I could make it here, I could lay up a day or two an' get my breath."

"Wait," said Indian Joe. He strode off silently in his buckskin moccasins. In a few minutes he was back as silently, carrying a huge turkey gobbler over one shoulder. "You want help for walk?" he asked.

"I got this far. Reckon I c'n make it to the cabin," Donnigan grinned. "You're sure a sight for sore eyes, Joe."

"She's be plenty lonesome without you, Donnigan," Indian Joe said simply.

And so, walking together—Indian hermit, spotted dog, wounded fugitive—they covered the last mile to the little grassy mountain valley where Indian Joe's log cabin had stood for twenty years.

Here in the high country where men seldom came, Indian Joe, gaunt, aged stalker of the mountain trails, lived alone. Joe trapped in the winter, killed wolves and cougars for the bounty, shot his meat, caught his fish, and now and then sallied down into the lower country to eye with disapproval the crowded range where men were hemmed in by neighbors as near as five miles.

Joe's neat, clean, pine-log cabin had two rooms. At the foot of the grassy slope before it a small trout stream brawled swiftly from the snow reservoirs among the peaks.

Indian Joe tossed the turkey on the clean-swept dirt before the front door and pointed inside.

"Home," he said.

Donnigan had known it would be like this. But yet, as he sat on the rawhide seat of a homemade chair and watched Indian Joe make coffee, fry bacon, set out

sourdough bread and open a can of hoarded peaches, Donnigan's heart grew full with the welcome. Life held nothing better than such a friend.

While Donnigan drank hot black coffee and recounted the events of the night before, Indian Joe took off the bloody shirt, washed the arm, examined it carefully.

The bone had not been touched, but the flesh was torn badly.

"This Buff Creed," said Indian stolidly. "One tam in Bitter Forks he shoot at my feet. I have promise some day I kill him, maybe."

"Creed ain't worth the trouble you'd get into, Joe. Lordy, I never tasted anything better'n this bacon. Seems like I walked all night with my mouth set for it."

"Don't eat much," Indian Joe cautioned. He put a finger on the swollen, feverish flesh around the wound. "Maybe you plenty sick man."

DONNIGAN looked down at his arm and nodded. "I began to figger that just before dawn when fever started in it. I can feel the blood poundin' now. Maybe I'll have to go down to a doctor an' give myself up?"

"No damn good," Indian Joe said. "You wait."

Indian Joe went into the next room, came back with a handful of dried leaves and a clean flour sack. He set a tin cup of water on the sheet iron wood stove, crumbled leaves in the warming water until he had a thick hot mash. With a hunting knife he ripped the flour sack into lengths, plastered the paste over the wound, and bound it there with strips of the sacking.

"She good by'm'by," Indian Joe promised. He went into the next room and came back with a clean shirt.

Donnigan put it on and grinned at the tight fit across his chest. "Good thing I don't have to wear all your clothes, Joe, I'd look like a skinned dogie. Now I got to get some sleep. Somebody may come lookin' for me. Folks knowed we was friends.

Joe chuckled. "I fix that, too. You come with me."

Taking a blanket from a bunk against the wall, Indian Joe motioned Donnigan to follow him out of the cabin.

Indian Joe led the way into a rocky, tree-sprinkled slope at the upper end of the little valley. A hundred yards up the slope he stepped around a great boulder, disappeared into the low entrance of a cave that was all but invisible unless a man came to this spot.

Following, Donnigan found the cave opened up inside. The roof was somewhat higher than his head. It was at least fifty feet deep with an up-slope to the floor. The cave was dry, airy, and would have sun in the entrance later in the day. One could look past the great rock in front, over the tops of the lower trees to Indian Joe's cabin. Pine needles and leaves had been carried in to form a thick, comfortable bed. Indian Joe tossed the blanket over it.

"I come back by'm'by," he said, and left in the silent, abrupt way he had of coming and going.

Donnigan lay down and slept at once despite the throbbing pain of his arm.

Late that afternoon, Donnigan struggled up, a sick man. His arm felt like it was on fire. The pain was shooting clear to his head. His face was dry, hot. He staggered weakly to his feet, lurched to the warm sunshine pouring in the cave mouth. His swimming eyes focused over the tree tops to Indian Joe's cabin. Half a dozen horsemen were gathered before it.

Men had remembered his friendship with Indian Joe and had come to this high mountain valley looking for him. A figure on foot faced them before the cabin door.

Donnigan reeled back to the blanket. He lay for a while staring at the cave

roof—and dropped off to sleep again, burning with fever.

FROM that time life became a black stretch through which grotesque nightmares whirled. Shorty Simmons, Donnigan's partner, grinned from the shadows as only Shorty could . . . round-up nights when lightning flashed and the cattle were boogery . . . gray days in the state prison with drab lines of prisoners marching in lock-step . . . the hurt, stricken look of a woman's face staring from the front row of the courtroom . . . imps clawing at the swollen arm.

There were short, lucid stretches when the whirling shadows rolled back and Donnigan found Indian Joe there in the cave, spooning broth through Donnigan's fevered lips, working on the throbbing swollen arm with hands gentle as a woman's. Indian Joe, muttering words of reassurance, and then the blackness rolling back, and hell again.

And then, abruptly, the afternoon sun was shining warmly, cheerfully into the cave mouth, and Donnigan's brain was clear—a great hunger was gnawing in him. Donnigan turned his head. Indian Joe was sitting cross-legged beside him.

"I—I musta slept sound today," Donnigan muttered. He was surprised at the weakness in his voice. "Seems to me I been dreamin' a heap," he recalled.

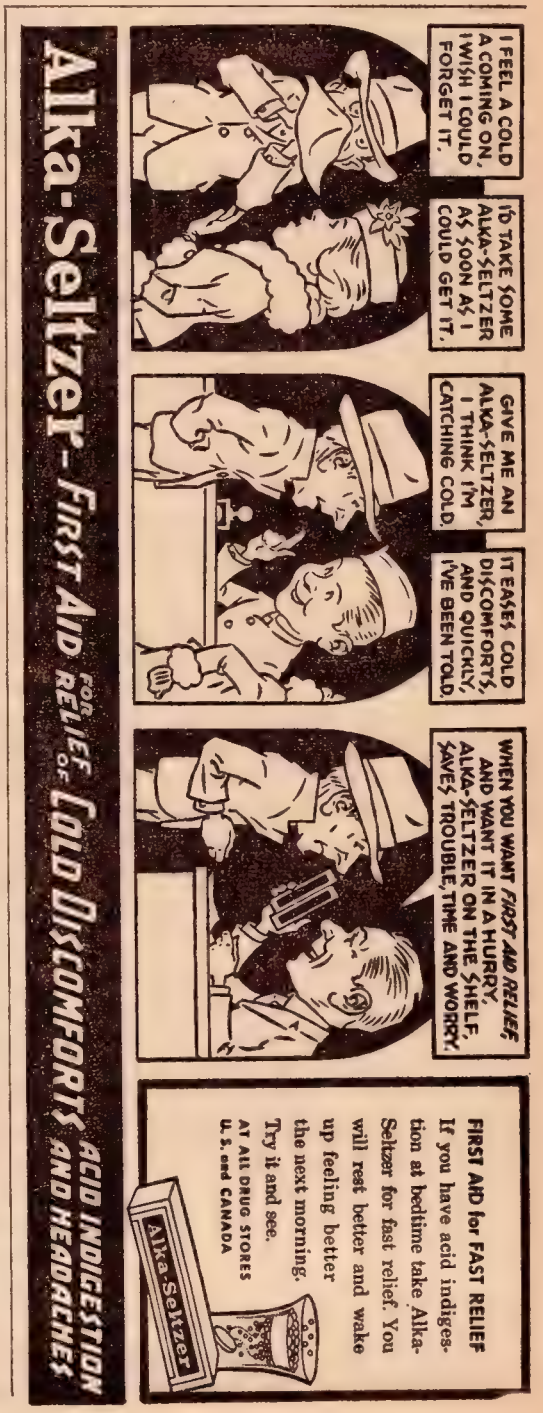
"Five days," said Indian Joe. "I say you be plenty sick. Sometam you holler so I think she hear you down in Bitter Fork.

Donnigan tried to sit up—and barely made it. All his strength had gone. But the fever had left, the pain was out of his arm, and his head was clear.

"Five days," he said wonderingly. "You been runnin' up here lookin' after me five days, Joe?"

Indian Joe nodded. "I think maybe I have to tie you down sometam," he said, smiling with the corners of his eyes. "You plenty mad. You loco in the head!"

"Musta been delirious," said Donnigan, thinking. "Seems to me I recall somethin' about some riders down at your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cabin. But I'm not sure about that."

"Creed come first day," said Indian Joe. "Want to know where you are. Look all around. Indian Joe spat. "Good thing I burn your shirt."

"So Creed come lookin' for me?" Donnigan mused. "He must want me bad."

"Uh-huh," said Indian Joe. "How you walk?"

Donnigan tried to stand up. Indian Joe had to help him. But by gritting his teeth and leaning heavily on the old man, Donnigan got out of the cave, down the rocky slope, and across the grass to the cabin. He collapsed on the bunk while Indian Joe made a bowl of turkey broth—and topped it with a slab of warm turkey meat.

Then while Donnigan had his first smoke for days, Indian Joe examined the arm. It was healing.

"Good," Indian Joe grunted. "But damn bad for time. Plenty poison. Now you sleep."

Lazy days followed. Days when Donnigan sat in the sun before the cabin and talked with Indian Joe; days when he moved about and began to tramp the hills near-by, gaining strength rapidly. Under Indian Joe's constant attention and use of strange herbs the wounds healed miraculously.

No more riders from the lower country appeared. Up here on the high slopes the world was far away.

Evenings they sat by the stove, smoking, yarning. Indian Joe could tell Donnigan no more about Shorty Simmons' death than Donnigan had heard in Bitter Valley the day he returned. Shorty had been dead weeks before his body had been found back on the mountains. By then it was too late to tell what had killed him. The remains had been buried where they were found.

"SHORTY was the best partner a fellow ever had," Donnigan told Indian Joe soberly. "He didn't die natural. Nothin'll ever make me believe that."

Indian Joe nodded silently.

"Three years ago," said Donnigan bitterly, "I had half a ranch, half a sweet bunch of cows, money in the bank, folks I thought was friends, a girl I used to lay awake at night plannin' to marry. I had all a man could want. I was happy. My head was up with the best of them.

"Look at me now, Joe. On the run from a killin' I didn't do, and a stretch in the pen behind me. Folks look down on me as a rustler and warn me I'm not wanted in Bitter Valley. My cows is gone, my partner's dead, my dreams is busted, an' I'm a renegade. Sometimes I wake up at night wonderin' if it ain't all a nightmare. All that couldn't happen to a man who never harmed anyone."

"You got friend here; home here," said Indian Joe placidly.

"Don't think I don't appreciate it, Joe. If we both live long enough, I'll try to pay a little of it back."

At daybreak the next morning Indian Joe left for Bitter Valley on one of his fat ponies, riding Indian style, bareback and using a hackamore. His spotted dog followed him.

Donnigan wandered around restlessly all day. He had a hot supper ready at dark when Indian Joe rode a weary horse up to the door and slipped soundlessly off on moccasined feet.

Something had happened down below, Donnigan saw at a glance. Indian Joe was grinning broadly.

"Tomorrow," said Indian Joe, "you go to Bitter Fork."

"I ain't a fool, Joe."

"Bitter Fork," Indian Joe repeated with a broader grin. "Las' week one man, she hold up stage an' get shot. Before she die he say kill Te'weiler. They don' want you now."

Donnigan stared for a moment, then let out a yell and threw an arm around Indian Joe's shoulder. "I could kick like a

spring colt on green grass!" Donnigan laughed. "Lord, what a load off my mind! Come in and get your grub. I'm too wild to eat."

Indian Joe gave Donnigan a questioning look as he entered the cabin. "What you do now?" he asked.

Donnigan sobered. His face drew into hard, bleak lines. "I reckon I've knowed all along what I'd do if I could. I still got money in the bank. Shorty an' I kept our pile together, so if one ever got kilt the other'd have it. I'm going down in the valley, buy cattle, start up the ranch again, an' show every son in forty days ride I c'n still hold my head up." Donnigan paused, then said bitterly, "An' I'm gonna try to find out what really happened to Shorty!"

CHAPTER TWO

A Renegade Rides Back

DONNIGAN left the next morning, taking one of Indian's Joe's ponies and an old saddle and bridle Joe never used. Just before he swung into the saddle, Joe brought out a worn cartridge belt and an old single-shot pistol.

"Better take," Indian Joe said impassively.

"I don't need a gun now."

"Best time kill deer when she not afraid," said Indian Joe.

Slowly Donnigan reached down for the gun belt.

"You're right," he admitted. "Good-by, old-timer. You know how I feel about all this. I'll bring your pony back myself soon as I get my feet on the ground down there."

"Plenty time," said Indian Joe. "Watch your feet."

Bitter Fork looked the same as ever, sprawling there beside the shallow, sandy channel of Bitter Fork river. And yet to Donnigan it was different as he rode in on Indian Joe's sleek pony. It was strange.

He was a man coming back from exile; a man who now rode free of the noose's shadow.

Donnigan stopped first at the red brick building which housed the bank. Miss Sue Gibbons, rated the best gossip in Bitter Fork, was just turning away from the teller's window when Donnigan entered. She gave him a startled look, sailed past him with her nose in the air, ignoring Donnigan's faint grin and lifted hat.

Lem Whitaker, the cashier, looked through the teller's window with his usual jovial smile. It vanished. His jaw dropped. "Why—why hello, Donnigan."

"Hello, yourself," said Donnigan. "I want a hundred cash an' a check book. You look like a ghost has walked in on you."

"Well—er—I wasn't expecting to see you," Whitaker stumbled.

"Why not?" said Donnigan, smiling calmly. "Ain't my account here?"

"Yes, but I thought you were—"

"Whatever you thought—I wasn't," said Donnigan. "Give me my money. You don't know of a nice bunch of cows for sale, do you?"

Lem Whitaker was superintendent of the Sunday school. He had been a bosom friend of Deacon Tetweiler. His pudgy face grew sharp with disapproval as he slid three gold pieces and four bills under the wicket, and slapped a check book down after them.

"I don't know of any cows for sale," Whitaker said. "You'll find cows hard to buy this time of year."

"What you mean," said Donnigan with a crooked smile, "is cows'll be hard for me to buy any time. Just to make your dinner set better, I'll tell you I'll get cows if I have to ship 'em in. You can spread the word around that the SD ranch is on its legs again an'll be shippin' beef as usual. I can use cowhands too."

Whitaker pressed his lips together

tightly and said nothing to Matt Donnigan.

Donnigan was grinning as he walked outside. And the grin vanished when the first person he met outside the door cried, "Matt!"

Donnigan went pale. Lia Brady was pale, too. Donnigan was twenty-nine; Lia, twenty-three. Donnigan just missed being six feet and Lia's brown curly hair barely reached his throat. Lia Brady's face was oval, finely-shaped, and her tip-tilt nose was saucy, her lips red, shaped for laughter and her gray eyes usually merry. But now those eyes held pain.

"I—I didn't think I'd meet you here in town," Donnigan said lamely.

LIA wasn't smiling. She had the look of one who saw old wounds opening up. She spoke uncertainly. "I wrote you two letters, Matt. You didn't answer them."

Donnigan nodded. "I thought it was best, Lia. There wasn't any use in your writin' to a man in the pen."

"Was that all?"

"I reckon that was enough."

A flush of indignation crept over Lia's first pallor. "How dared you get ideas like that, Matt Donnigan! You were hurt, bitter, but you had no right to take it out on me. I hadn't done anything to you."

Donnigan clenched his fists, grew whiter. He saw people on the street stopping, staring at them. Most of Bitter Fork knew how they had been. Miss Sue Gibbons was across the street with two women friends eyeing them avidly.

"Maybe it ain't so good for you to be seen here on the street with me," Donnigan muttered. "I don't rate well with folks these days. Deacon Tetweiler led off the circus—an' Lem Whitaker just spoke his piece. I'm a renegade, Lia."

"Matt Donnigan," said Lia Brady in a choked voice, "I could slap you right here, before everyone! Do I have to beg you to be decent to me? Have you forgotten all the nice things you used to say to me?"

"Forgotten them!" Donnigan choked with sudden fierceness. "What kind of a man do you think I am, Lia? I've thought of 'em days an' nights till it seemed I'd go crazy over what I'd lost. Why—why Lia, honey, I thought I loved you then. But I didn't know what it was to love. There'll never be another woman for me—but I ain't the man for you any more. I'm a renegade. I ain't wanted. Until folks want me, until they're proud to call me friend, I—I can't tell you the things I want to."

Lia was smiling. Her eyes were wet. "That's all I wanted to know," she said. "Matt, you big goose, did you think I could ever stop loving you? What do you think I've been doing the last three years? Waiting for you, praying you'd come back, hoping you hadn't forgotten. Just now you made the sun shine for me again. Nothing else can ever matter."

"Oh, Lord!" Donnigan groaned. "If folks wasn't lookin' I'd kiss you right here on the street—even though I know it'd be a fool stunt, an' what I've told you has got to stand."

The bank door slammed behind Donnigan. An oath of anger reached his ears. Shattuck Brady, Lia's father, planted himself firmly in front of Donnigan and the girl.

"If I'd knowed this was going to happen, I'd have stopped it before it started! Lia, get along to the buggy! Donnigan, I didn't think you'd have the nerve to speak to my daughter again."

Shattuck Brady was a huge man, standing half a head taller than Donnigan. His weathered face had the handsome traits he had given to Lia. Those gray eyes of Shattuck Brady's could be merry as hers. But now the eyes were cold. Shattuck Brady's brown mustache could not hide the hard anger around his mouth.

DONNIGAN answered coolly, "According to your way of thinkin', maybe you're right, Brady. This was an accidental meetin'. I was telling Lia I wouldn't see her any more."

"And I wasn't listening!" Lia burst out. "I'll not be a target for Matt's foolish ideas or your wrong ones, Dad!"

"You heard me, Lia!" Shattuck Brady said harshly. "Get in the buggy!"

White-lipped, she answered, "I'm of age! I'm afraid I'll have to do what I think best!"

"Please, Lia!" Donnigan begged.

Shattuck Brady growled deep in his throat. His coat was open. He brushed it back so the gun he wore was clear. "Don't put me to the trouble of drawin' a gun on this man an' runnin' him away from you, Lia!" Shattuck Brady warned with anger that was more ominous because he did not raise his voice.

"Lia," said Donnigan miserably, "don't make him! For if he does, I'll have to defend myself. There's no man in the world I'll crawl to from this day on."

"Oh, dear God, not that!" Lia cried. "I'll go to the buggy! Please get away from each other until you cool off and can think sensibly!"

She hurried on along the sidewalk. When she was out of earshot Shattuck Brady wheeled to Donnigan.

"Stay away from her!" he grated. "I want no prison whelp disgracing my daughter with his attentions! If I catch you runnin' after her, I'll hunt you down with a gun and save the hangman trouble! That's my final word!" Shattuck Brady turned on his heel and stalked away after his daughter.

A score of people had watched it. Donnigan's face was red with anger, his mind was whirling as he left Indian Joe's pony before the bank and cut across the street to the saloon.

A dozen men were in the Big Deuce bar. A tense hush was over the room as Donnigan walked in. He saw the reason.

Halfway down the bar Buff Creed was standing with a sneering grin on his face. Bert Willis was just beyond. With a quick glance Donnigan recognized two cowpunchers who had been with Creed in the hanging party.

A tense silence held everyone in the room as Donnigan ordered and poured a drink, and took it neat. Then as Donnigan picked up his change, Buff Creed spoke to Willis with a sneer. "I didn't think he'd have the nerve tuh come back."

Donnigan pocketed the change, turned deliberately, looked along the bar at Creed. "Referring to me?" he asked slowly.

Creed looked at him with exaggerated surprise. "Why not, Donnigan?"

"Just so you won't start wonderin' about other things," Donnigan said, "I'll let you know now I'm stocking the SD ranch again. And Creed, I'm givin' you public warning never to be caught inside SD wire again. That goes for you too, Willis—an' the men workin' for both of you."

Bert Willis grinned nervously and said nothing. He had never been noted for his personal courage.

Creed snorted, "Puttin' your roots down again, Donnigan? You've got a nerve tryin' it! Folks don't want you in the valley. If I know anything about 'em, they won't stand for it. I reckon it'd been a good thing if that hangin' had gone off on schedule."

Donnigan nodded slowly. "Maybe—for you, Creed. I've been askin' myself why you led that bunch of weak-willed, blood-sniffers to put a noose around my neck. I reckon I'll find out if I look long enough!"

Creed's face was truculent. "I don't care to be a neighbor to jail-bait! I ain't got any more use for you than Shattuck Brady had a few minutes ago, when he caught you there in front of the bank!"

Several of the men grinned at that.

Donnigan began to tremble. "Creed," he said in a thin voice, "you're eggin' me on to start trouble because you know I don't want it. But, Creed, you're steppin' close to trouble. I'm gettin' away before you crowd me. My warnin' about SD land stands."

Donnigan walked to the door with his hand well away from his gun; and as he went out Creed's sneering voice followed. "He ain't only jail-bait—he's yellow. Drink up, boys, an' wash the taste of him outa yore mouths. He won't last long!"

CHAPTER THREE

Coward Brand

DONNIGAN had trouble getting his cows. The range was dry, drought threatened, but nobody would sell. Old Whisker Bill Inman came out bluntly with his reason.

"I'd be glad tuh take yore money, Donnigan. Fact is, I need it like hell. But Lem Whitaker has put the Injun sign on yuh. When I went into the bank tuh see about time on my note, Whitaker dropped a hint he didn't favor no man who'd help yuh get started again."

Whisker Bill fingered his ragged gray beard and nailed a wandering beetle with a stream of tobacco juice. "It ain't right. I'm all fer you, Donnigan. It riles me tuh have a curb bit jammed in my teeth by a sanctimonious note-shaver like Whitaker. But he's got me hawg-tied with my note. I got tuh look out for myself. All I can do is wish yuh plenty of luck."

"I understand," Donnigan said. "Thanks for the luck, Bill. I need it."

Donnigan got his cattle in small bunches from outfits out of the valley. He hired two hands.

Jigger Jones was a short, bandy-legged cowboy with a cast in his left eye and a cheek always bulging with a huge quid of tobacco. Roaring Bill Quinn, taller than Donnigan and broader, had a voice like a foghorn, a hair-trigger temper and a love for trouble. Roaring Bill had just been fired from his last job over beyond Cripple Spring for beating up the foreman.

"The wages are small an' there'll be plenty of work," Donnigan warned. "I ain't wanted in the valley. We'll be playin' a lone hand. And I won't stand for fighting. I'm tryin' to live peaceful."

Roaring Bill grinned hugely and boomed, "Keep my belly full an' try tuh swamp me with work. I'm a lone wolf myself an' I'm peaceful as a pet calf. When do we start?

"Right now," said Donnigan. "I'm headin' for some cows."

Once more life stirred on SD land. Cows grazed on the lush flats; calves frisked in the sunlight, horses moved against the horizon, the men tramped in the cabin.

Indian Joe appeared silently, stayed overnight, left with his pony. Other visits followed that. Indian Joe helped where he was needed, said little, vanished without farewell when he was ready to leave.

Hard work filled the days. Fences had to be repaired, new wire strung, waterholes cleared, stray cattle hazed off. Grass was high on SD land and cattle had wandered in or been thrown in.

Most of the banked money had gone into the place. Donnigan had bought, at bargain prices, a few young steers to fatten. The calves were coming along. With luck there would be enough saleable stuff in the fall to carry on comfortably until next year.

There were times at night when the memory of a girl's troubled face stayed close to Donnigan. He tried to forget Lia, and couldn't. The place was lonesome without Shorty Simmons, too. Donnigan hunted up Shorty's lonely, unmarked

grave in upper Squaw Valley, four miles from the cabin. Shorty had evidently been up here sifting the brush when death overtook him. Donnigan stood a long time by the weathered mound of dirt, then soberly turned his back on the spot for good.

Jigger Jones and Roaring Bill did the town errands. Donnigan seldom went to Bitter Fork. When he did, there was no change. He was still the renegade of Bitter Valley. People eyed him with askance.

Roaring Bill Quinn brought the first hint of trouble.

One noon he galloped in to the cabin and boomed: "The wire's down in the south pasture an' there's a hundred head of Brady cattle workin' on our grass. They musta been in for two-three days, by the way they've et it off."

"Grab a bite an' we'll ride over an' haze 'em out," Donnigan said. "Brady's grass must be gettin' almighty short for them to bust through the wire that way."

Roaring Bill snorted. "Bust, hell! That wire was pulled down! I found a frazzle o' rope on one of the barbs. Old Shattuck Brady's got more tricks than a one-armed hoss thief."

Donnigan's face darkened. "We'll stop that," he said curtly.

IT WAS a hot, sweaty job that long afternoon, combing the brush and draws and throwing the Brady cattle back across the wire. Donnigan satisfied himself about the frazzle of rope. The wires had been dragged from the posts for a hundred yards and left on the ground. The staples on this section of fence were on the Brady side. The pulling had been done from that side.

Roaring Bill ran some of the last cows well over on Brady's land. Donnigan was studying the fence when he heard Roaring Bill's voice raised in a bellow of anger. Donnigan galloped toward the spot, knowing suddenly trouble was here.

Bill was in the saddle facing four Brady cowhands.

"What's the matter?" Donnigan demanded, riding between them.

Bill yelled, "These ory-eyed grass-snatchers come steamin' up accusin' us of monkeyin' with their beef! They are lookin' for rustlers, an' they figger we fill the bill! One more word outa 'em an' I'll clean up the whole bunch!"

A red-headed, sour-visaged man who sat stiffly in his saddle, moved his hand menacingly toward his gun. "If yuh pine fer trouble, Big Mouth, lead off!" he barked. "We got our orders about yuh SD men—an' when we find yuh on our side o' the wire hazin' our beef, yuh better come through with somethin' more'n loud talk."

"Yuh'll get it!" Bill yelled. "If you're honin' tuh draw that pea-shooter on yore leg, drag it quick!"

"Wait a minute!" Donnigan rapped, turning angrily to the red-headed man. "The wire was pulled down from this side of the fence! Your half-starved critters was cuttin' down on my grass fast! We've been runnin' 'em back! If you need a warning not to try any dirty tricks like that again, you're gettin' it now! Tell Shattuck Brady to buy his feed!"

A short, thick-chested man with a scar on his left cheek and a rattlesnake band around his sombrero, pushed forward, answering with cold anger.

"I reckon yo're Donnigan. If yuh claim Tumblin' L men have been pullin' down wire to get at yore grass, it's a damn lie! Tumblin' L beef is gettin' awful scarce on this side of the range. Brady has give orders to find out why. If he knowed the wire was down an' you was hazin' his cows near it, he'd argue with lead an' talk about it later. No one from Tumbling L pulled that wire down. Yuh hear me? I'm callin' you saddle-tramps liars!"

"Stand back, Donnigan!" Roaring Bill

bellowed. "No man can call me a liar an' git away with it!"

Horses swerved. Guns came out. Roaring Bill's face was black with anger as he flipped out his gun and tried to ride around Donnigan.

Donnigan drove his horses against Roaring Bill's horse, so that he blocked the big man. "Put that gun up, Bill!" Donnigan rasped angrily.

The big cowhand sawed on the bit and tried to ride around Donnigan. They clashed together hard. Donnigan yanked out his own gun. Before Roaring Bill knew what was happening, steel clubbed his head.

ROARING Bill Quinn slipped forward in the saddle. Donnigan grabbed him and heaved the heavy figure over before him. Roaring Bill lay limply, blood showing at the edge of his hair. His gun was down in the dirt.

Behind Donnigan the red-headed cowpuncher uttered an oath of scornful disbelief. "Slugged his own man tuh keep outa a fight!"

Donnigan reined around facing the Brady men. "Listen to me, you misguided fools!" he gritted. "I don't want trouble! My men have got orders to keep out of it. The wire was pulled down from this side. The rope marks are still on it."

The man with a scar on his cheek sneered truculently. "Rope marks don't tell us who dragged it down. Yuh served time for rustlin', Donnigan, an' you've just showed that you're yellah as a bullfrog's gizzard. If we catch yuh on this side of our wire again monkeyin' with our beef, we won't waste talk on yuh. We'll rope yuh off yore hoss an' pistol-whip yuh. Now get the hell off Tumblin' L land an' stay off!"

Donnigan began to tremble as he held Roaring Bill across the saddle and looked at them. "You can't push me to draw!" Donnigan said hoarsely, "I'm stayin' peaceable, damn you! I'm ridin' wide!"

Leaving Roaring Bill's gun there on the ground, Donnigan caught the reins of the riderless horse and rode back toward his own land, with Roaring Bill's limp body across the saddle before him.

"I've heered about men bein' that yellow, but I never figgered I'd see one," a Brady men said loudly as he went.

Through a red haze Donnigan felt Roaring Bill's pulse. It beat slowly but strongly. Roaring Bill would come out of it all right.

Donnigan was near the wire and Jigger Jones was a quarter mile away, pushing three steers toward him, when a clear whistle rang out. Donnigan looked up. Lia Brady was galloping toward him. Her face held swift concern as she came up.

"What is it, Matt? Have you had trouble?" Lia asked, casting a worried look at Bill's limp figure.

Donnigan grinned weakly. "I've just been keepin' out of trouble," he told her. "Bill, here, had a little accident. He'll come around all right."

Lia's face was flushed with sun and exercise. She was pretty. Too pretty. Donnigan felt the sinking feeling in his middle that came these days when he thought of her.

"I'm glad it wasn't anything serious," Lia sighed with relief. "Seeing you on this side of the fence, carrying that man, I—I didn't know what had happened."

"Nothin'll ever happen on this side, as far as I'm concerned," Donnigan replied grimly.

Lia smiled sadly. "I'm beginning to believe that, Matt. I've ridden this way time after time hoping I'd see you. But I never do. I saw you in Bitter Fork one day but you hurried away and disappeared."

Donnigan replied miserably. "I've been tryin' to keep away from you, Lia. I don't come to this side of the ranch if I

can help it—for fear I'll see you."

Lia colored, stiffened. "What am I to think when you talk to me like that, Matt? You make me feel like a little fool."

"Don't you turn on me today," Donnigan begged. "It's hard enough as it is, Lia, girl. Can't you feel you're never out of my mind?"

"You show it in strange ways, Matt."

"I'm showin' it the only way I know how," Donnigan said heavily. "You haven't forgotten your father, have you? There'll be trouble sure if I'm fool enough to give way. He still looks on me as a renegade. I won't hurt you by gettin' you mixed up with my troubles."

Her face shadowed. "Matt, can't I make you see your troubles are mine? But—I love dad, too. I don't think I could stand trouble between you two—maybe one of you killing the other. And dad won't change. He's stubborn; his mind is made up, Matt. What's going to happen to us?" Lia cried. "Must I go on waiting—always afraid?"

"There won't be any trouble, honey."

"Are you sure of that, Matt? Can you promise me?"

DONNIGAN forced a grin. "Sure I can promise. I just dodged trouble before you rode up. After what just happened, nothin' can make me fight your folks."

"What happened?"

"Some of the Tumbling L men pulled the wire down an' ran cattle over on my grass. Your range is getting pretty thin, an' I reckon my grass looked too good to pass up."

"Dad never did anything like that, Matt."

"He won't shed any tears about it," Donnigan grinned. "He's an old fox."

Lia's cheeks were flaming as Donnigan finished.

"I'll report it," she said. "You can be sure, Matt Donngian, no Tumbling L cows will get on your land again. We don't run our ranch that way!"

Lia quirted her horse and galloped away.

Donnigan looked after her with amazement. "I put my foot in it," he said aloud. "No matter which way I turn, it's wrong."

Donnigan glumly rode to meet Jigger Jones.

Roaring Bill was lying on the ground when his eyes opened. For a moment Roaring Bill looked stupidly around—then remembered. He surged to his feet, cursing.

Glaring at Donnigan, who stood soberly smoking a cigarette, Roaring Bill choked, "Donnigan, yuh bent a gun over my head! I'm through! Gimme my pay!"

Jigger Jones shifted his big quid of tobacco to the other cheek. "Donnigan's told me what happened, Bill," Jigger said. "He was right to his way of thinkin'. Ca'm down an' talk reasonable about it."

"Reasonable, hell! I was fightin' for Donnigan hisself, wasn't I? An' he turned on me! I'm ashamed tuh be drawin' his pay. Donnigan, I've heard tell yuh was yellow—an' now I know it. Yuh clubbed me when I wasn't lookin' so you could crawl outa trouble."

Donnigan met Roaring Bill's glare calmly. "You were warned when I hired you, I'd stand for no fighting, Bill. And the first time trouble snuck up on you, you rared to meet it. In another minute, men'd been killed."

"What of it?" Roaring Bill shouted. "Didn't you hear what he said?"

"I don't give a damn what Shattuck Brady's cowhands think of my ways," Donnigan said. "If there'd been gun play, we'd a been pitchforked into a range feud. The word would 'a gone out that I'd been caught with Brady's cows."

"Yo're yellow, Donnigan! I hate to say it, but yuh are! I'm huntin' me a boss I can respect."

Donnigan smiled thinly. "Maybe we can settle that here, Bill. Put up your fists, you over-grown leather-walloper, an' let's see how much of a man you are yourself!"

DONNIGAN unbuckled his gun belt, tossed it aside, stepped in swiftly and drove a fist into Quinn's middle.

Bill grunted, staggered back, looked pained, then angry as he got his breath back. "I'm gonna wipe up the ground with you, Donnigan!" he bellowed, and rushed, flailing huge fists.

Roaring Bill was a head taller, a good twenty pounds heavier, all beef and muscle. Donnigan slipped aside from that bull-like rush and snapped a fist to Roaring Bill's cheek. Quinn bellowed again as he whirled around and came back.

"Stand up an' fight!"

Donnigan grinned, dodged the second rush and smashed another blow to Quinn's cheek. The skin split. Blood appeared. Quinn shook his head, came back warily, ready to dodge too. Donnigan met him flat-footed, driving straight-arm blows. Roaring Bill rocked back on his heels, then settled himself and traded blow for blow.

A smashing fist caught Donnigan over the heart. Life seemed to stop for a moment. Roaring Bill crowded in, pasted Donningan over the eye, spun him half around with a mighty smash on the shoulder.

Donnigan weaved back out of a clinch. His eye was already beginning to close. Roaring Bill's fists were like sledge hammers when they landed. But hard work had put whipcord and steel in Donnigan's body once more. He stepped back before Quinn's next rush—and suddenly leaped in savagely, smashing straight-arm punches, upper-cutting, hooking a storm of blows that did not stop.

Roaring Bill bowed like a mighty pine before a gale, and set himself and traded blow for blow. Science was forgotten in that wild melee of slugging.

Jigger Jones was jumping up and down, yelling and cursing.

Human flesh could not long stand such wild fighting. Gasping, blood-streaked, they slowed down, began to stagger.

Roaring Bill suddenly stepped back with a grin on his bloody, battered face. "I'm satisfied, Donnigan. Yo're a ten-clawed grizzly from the bobcat country. If yo're willin' to call it quits an' shake hands, I'll be proud tuh go on with yuh."

Gulping air, Donnigan grinned too as he met Quinn's grip. "You're plenty man, too, Bill. I'm proud to have you."

That fight welded them together. Donnigan, Roaring Bill and Jigger Jones rode three abreast now, friends. But Donnigan was still a pariah in Bitter Valley.

There were ominous reports of cattle missing. Jigger Jones came back from Bitter Fork with news that Shattuck Brady was threatening publicly to kill any man he caught fooling with Brady's cattle. Buff Creed was claiming the loss of at least a hundred head. Cattle were working high up the mountain slopes where feed was better. In that tangled high country line fences seldom ran. Ranchers began eyeing one another with suspicion.

"You'd think Roarin' Bill an' me was pizen, the way folks look at us in Bitter Fork," Jigger Jones complained bitterly. "I was asked three times how much beef we'd lost. How-come, Donnigan, all this rustlin' is passin' us up?"

"I've been wonderin' myself," Donnigan confessed. "I've been puttin' two an' two together, an' gettin' four, if it means anything."

THEY were standing in front of the cabin after supper. The full moon was a placid silver disk overhead. Fireflies winked in the darkness like drifting

sparks. An owl hooted behind the cabin as Donnigan struck a match and lighted a cigarette. In the yellow glare his face was lean, brooding.

"I been askin' myself," said Donnigan as he flipped the match away, "why Buff Creed was so damn anxious to get me hanged when I first came back. An' what really happened to Shorty Simmons."

"I hear his hoss was never found," Jigger Jones said.

"What happened to it?" Donnigan asked. "Who run off all the stock after Shorty died? Who tore down the fences? An' why has Buff Creed got such a hate ag'in' me?"

"Ask me somethin' easy," said Jigger Jones.

"That ain't all," said Donnigan. "Who was behind that rustlin' deal I did time in the pen for? Buff Creed was deputy sheriff then. He was one of the bunch who found the cows on my land with their brands fresh worked over. Bert Willis, who licks Creed's boots, found a green hide belongin' to Lariat Jenkins back up in the brush. A fool wouldn't have left that green hide around to stink if he was guilty. An' Buff Creed and Bert Willis were ready to hang me soon as I got back."

"You think Buff Creed had a hand in double-crossin' you into the pen?" Jigger Jones asked with interest.

"I'd like to know, Jigger."

"What'd he want tuh pick on you for?"

"I don't know," said Donnigan. "Creed wanted to buy this land once. We wouldn't sell. That didn't set well with him. His land touches the SD on the south, you know."

"That ain't much tuh nail Creed with," Jigger said.

"I'm not figgering on nailing Creed," Donnigan said. "That all happened too long ago. Shorty's dead. It won't help him to go pokin' into old dirt. I've served my time in the pen an' I can't undo that. If I can build my life here like I want it, I'll be satisfied."

"Marry an' raise kids, I suppose," Jigger Jones said slyly.

"None of your blasted business," Donnigan said sheepishly.

The owl hooted again.

Roaring Bill Quinn spat audibly on the ground. "That goggle-eyed pigeon reminds me of the old owlhoot trail," he said. "Hear him moanin', 'Who-who-who?' I been askin' myself where'd all this missin' beef go? It ain't in the valley. It ain't been shipped out. There ain't been no strangers around. And if there's any hombre slick enough to rustle cattle over the mountain, he can tie leather on my back an' take his ride. How about it, Donnigan?"

"It could be done," Donnigan said. "Squaw Canyon leads up into Little Skeleton Canyon and that takes you to Big Grizzly at the top. From Big Grizzly there's a dozen ways to get down the other side."

"Then what?" Roaring Bill argued. "The mountain busts straight off on that side. The rains all stop here at the Valley. There's a hundred an' twenty miles of dry hills an' desert over there. No water on it; not much feed. Nobody but an outlaw on the run or a crazy Injun ever crosses it. There ain't a cow built that could make it that far without water."

"If they did make it, they'd be within strikin' distance of the border," Jigger Jones mused. "If I could figure how to get a cow that far without water, I'd go over there an' have a look."

"You figure," Donnigan chuckled. "And when you get the answer I'll go over with you."

The next afternoon Donnigan heard three faint gun shots in the direction of the cabin. He galloped back in. Indian Joe was there with his spotted dog.

"Did you fire them shots, Joe?" Donnigan asked, swinging down.

"No. Horse. Want see you," said Indian Joe. "Dead man up Squaw Canyon."

Startled, Donnigan said, "Who is it?"

Indian Joe shrugged. "Don't know. Shot in head."

Roaring Bill Quinn and Jigger Jones came racing in. "What's the shootin' about?" Roaring Bill yelled.

Donnigan gave them the news.

"That ain't far from where your partner got his," Jones said.

"No," Donnigan agreed, his eyes narrowing.

Indian Joe pointed up the mountain. "Cows go that way."

"Cows up there."

"Tracks," said Indian Joe.

Donnigan looked at Jigger Jones. Jigger was chewing furiously. The cast in his left eye gave him a quizzical look.

"I ain't figured how tuh get cows across the dry stretch yet," said Jigger. "But I bet there's an answer."

"Damned if I don't think you're right!" Donnigan suddenly agreed. "We'll look into it when I get back with the sheriff. You boys go up the canyon an' have a look at the body. See if you can nose out anything. Better put the rest of the remuda in the corral. I'll be needin' a fresh horse when I get back."

DONNIGAN rode hard to Bitter Creek. Darkness was just closing in when he got to the sheriff's office. The door was locked. A man standing nearby volunteered the information that the sheriff had ridden out in the afternoon, saying he'd be back by dark.

Donnigan rode to the Big Deuce saloon, racked his horse in front and stepped in for a drink.

A dozen men were inside. Donnigan saw only one—Buff Creed, wearing chaps and gun. Creed's face twisted in a sneering smile as he saw the newcomer. Donnigan went to the bar, ignoring Creed.

"You're layin' right low, these days, Donnigan," Creed said, still smiling.

"I'm mindin' my own business, at least," Donnigan replied curtly.

"Must be queer business tuh keep you under cover so much."

Donnigan tossed off his drink, took the chaser, ordered another. "I don't like you Creed," he said, turning his head. "Keep your mouth out of my affairs."

"Maybe it's time someone looked into yore affairs."

"Meaning what?" Donnigan snapped.

"Once a thief, always a thief about hits it, I reckon."

"Damn you, Creed!"

Creed laughed. "Yo're yellow, Donnigan. Don't waste yore breath. I'll—"

Creed broke off as a horse rushed to the front of the saloon and the rider ran to the Big Deuce entrance. The swinging doors burst open. And Donnigan knocked over his glass as Lia Brady appeared there in the doorway, where few women ever stepped.

"Matt! Come outside, quick! It's important!"

Behind Donnigan, Buff Creed chortled loudly. "It'll be a damn sight more important if old Shattuck Brady catches 'em."

Donnigan drew his gun as he whirled toward Creed. Instead of shooting he slammed the heavy weapon broadside into Creed's face. The man dropped like a poled ox, nose broken, blood spouting from his smashed features, gun clattering from his hand.

Donnigan crouched, sweeping the room with his gun.

"Anybody here want to take it up?" he demanded harshly.

Uneasy silence had fallen. No man was smiling now.

From the doorway Lia begged frantically, "Matt, for God's sake, hurry! They're coming!"

As Donnigan turned toward the door, her words were borne out. Other riders

raced up and leaped down. The dust flew.

"Who's coming?" Donnigan turned and asked—and stopped short as a long arm plucked Lia back and Shattuck Brady lunged into the room.

The big cattleman's face was a mask of fury. Men crowded in behind him. "Donnigan," Shattuck Brady blared, "you ain't even going to get a rope around your neck this time!"

Shattuck Brady's gun was out. Lia pushed in behind him and caught his arm. Men scattered, some vaulting over the bar. The barkeep yelled, "Don't start nothin' in here, gents."

BACKING off a step, Donnigan demanded, "What's the matter with you, Brady?"

Shattuck Brady roared, "Matter enough, you damn bushwackin' cow thief! You're caught cold this time. My men found where you eased some of our cattle through onto your land!"

"You're a liar, Brady!"

"One of them critters had a twisted hind foot, Donnigan. Two of my men followed it across your land, up the mountain into Squaw Canyon. And there, by God, you an' your murderin' cow-hands bushwhacked 'em! Killed one of 'em and damn near killed the other. He laid there all night, come out of it this mornin' an' took most of the day draggin' himself back to the ranch! Yuh didn't even give 'em warning, Donnigan! Yuh cracked 'em from cover!"

"Brady, we had nothing to do with that! Indian Joe found the dead man this afternoon! I rode in here quick to get the sheriff!"

"Come for the sheriff, did you, Donnigan? And I find you loafin' at the bar! They let you off once with the pen, and you dodged a hangin' when you got back. But your luck is over. We went to your cabin, found that damned Indian there, heard you had sneaked off here to Bitter Fork an' come for you. Throw down that gun an' come along or I'll kill you where you stand!"

Lia was sobbing. "Dad, please! I know you're wrong!"

"Pull her away!" Shattuck Brady ordered his men. "If I'd knowed she was going to ride ahead to warn him, I'd 'a locked her up!"

Tight-lipped, Donnigan said, "I've taken all off the valley I aim to! Call off your men, Brady, or I won't be responsible!"

The men in the doorway were putting Lia outside as gently as they could. Donnigan saw her face, white, tortured. And then she was gone, the door blocked with Brady's men.

Shattuck Brady demanded harshly, "Are you coming, Donnigan?"

"Damn you, no!" said Donnigan. "Don't make me kill you, Brady."

Shattuck Brady yelled, "Let him have it, boys!"

DONNIGAN knew he couldn't kill Lia's father. He whirled, vaulted across the bar. Guns blasted. Men shouted. Donnigan felt a bullet tear his leg; then he landed on a man who had sought shelter behind the bar.

The barkeep's scattergun shot out the big hanging lamp over the bar as Donnigan crouched and lunged to the back, past the men who had taken shelter behind the bar. The barkeep's gun roared again. The second lamp went out, throwing the room into blackness.

"He's back of the bar!" Shattuck Brady bawled. "Don't let him get away. Run around back an' watch for him!"

A door opened outside the back end of the bar. Donnigan yanked it open and dodged outside. The moon was not yet up. He ran through blackness to the back of the building and cut to the left behind the other buildings.

Horses stamped out ahead of him. As

Donnigan lifted his gun Lia Brady called out, "Matt! Are you back here?"

Donnigan limped forward. "What is it, Lia?"

"Here's your horse, Matt!"

Donnigan swung into the saddle. "Thanks, honey," he said hoarsely. "Good-by."

Her voice had been heard. Men were shouting Donnigan's location as he galloped to the first cross street. Lia swung her horse into the street beside him.

"Go back!" Donnigan called to her.

She answered as they rode. "I've had all of this I can stand! I'm going with you, Matt. From now on it's us against everybody!"

"You can't do it," Donnigan called as he pushed his horse hard. Already pursuit was fast behind them.

"I'm doing it," Lia cried.

Donnigan could not draw away from her. Bitter Fork fell behind. They rode across open country. The moon began to show.

"Where are you going, Matt?" Lia called.

"Cutting over to the ranch road. I'm getting my men if I can, and riding up Squaw Canyon, past the big burn and down to the dry sands. I think that's where your cattle went."

They raced across country with pursuit closely behind them and darkness about them. Donnigan didn't spare his horse. If he could make the ranch in time, he could get a fresh horse out of the corral before pushing on. Lia kept even with him.

They thundered along the ranch road. Five miles from the ranch Quinn's voice suddenly boomed off to the right. "That you, Donnigan?"

Donnigan turned toward Quinn. "Brady's men are coming!" he shouted. "I'm heading for a fresh horse!"

"This way! Indian Joe told us Brady an' his men was after you. We were headin' for Bitter Fork with hosses when we heard you comin'."

Roaring Bill led the way into a brushy hollow. Indian Joe and Jigger Jones had horses there. As he hit the ground and tore the saddle off, Donnigan heard the distant thunder of hoofs coming along the ranch road. He hurled the saddle on a fresh horse. Roaring Bill transferred the bridle. Donnigan talked as he worked. "Brady's convinced we got his cows an' killed his man. We've got to keep ahead of them."

Donnigan turned from the fresh-saddled horse, drew his knife, flipped the blade open and reached Lia Brady's panting horse in two steps. He caught the reins and severed them close to the bit.

"What did you do?" Lia cried angrily.

Donnigan vaulted into his saddle. "It's the only way to stop you, honey," he called.

Donnigan led his men at a gallop toward the mountains.

Through the long night they rode—up in the timber, up Squaw Canyon, up Little Skeleton Canyon and high in the chill thin air to the roof of the world. They had lost the pursuit quickly in the wild country.

ON THE other side of the mountain they dropped precipitously down steep, rocky slopes, sparsely covered with trees. Far below spread out the dry sands, barren and desolate. Indian Joe's spotted dog was following the trail of cattle which had come this way. He led them out into the dry country, running like a spotted ghost before them.

Sometime before dawn, Roaring Bill said, "I just seen a little light a way back there, like somebody struck a match."

"Bugs in yore eyes," said Jigger Jones. "There ain't nobody back there. We've come too fast."

An hour after that the dog suddenly turned his head and whined softly. Indian

Joe spoke under his breath. "Not far now."

"Get your guns ready, boys," Donnigan said. "Ride as easy as you can."

They rode forward a quarter of a mile, half a mile. Dawn was just graying the eastern horizon when Donnigan topped a rise of ground and reined in sharply as a horse whinnied ahead of him. A dog barked ahead.

The ride broke away sharply down to a small, barren flat. Down there a small fire was burning beside a big wagon. Restless cattle were being held in place by two riders. Men were harnessing horses to the wagon.

A shout rang out. "That you, Creed?"

"There's Brady's cattle an' the men who bushwhacked his riders!" Donnigan rapped out. "It's a toss-up, boys. Shall we hit 'em?"

"We're damned if we do an' damned if we don't," Roaring Bill said grimly. "Let's go!"

Donnigan spurred down the steep slope and raced toward the wagon, raising his voice in a wild yell. The others spread out behind him, yelling too.

A gun cracked at the wagon. Other shots followed. Donnigan fired at dim running forms. With a roll of hoofs the cattle stampeded in a wave across the flat.

The wagon lurched, rolled forward as the four-horse team being hitched to it ran away.

Lead whined past Donnigan. He saw a man swing on a horse and race off ahead of them after the cattle. Donnigan fired through the faint light. The man fell forward, hung onto the horse's neck and kept going. A bullet ripped through Donnigan's hat. He saw the shot flare near the campfire. A man was standing there with a rifle, frantically pumping another shell into the breach. He swung the rifle up again.

Donnigan ducked, heard the bullet scream just over his head. He emptied his gun at the man and missed. The rifle was coming up a second time when Donnigan bore down on the man.

The man leaped aside. Donnigan swerved the horse, crashed into the bearded stranger as the rifle went off. The man went down. The horse staggered, plunged to its knees, shot hard. Donnigan hit the ground, rolled, staggered up with the breath knocked out of him. But he still had his gun.

The man he had ridden down was staggering up, too.

Donnigan thumbed in two fresh cartridges and snapped the cylinder back as the man turned toward him, drawing a hand gun. It blasted, missed. Donnigan aimed carefully, fired once. The man pitched forward.

Roaring Bill's wild tones rose a hundred yards ahead, where he was following a rider. Guns barked. Roaring Bill turned back.

Jigger Jones galloped near. "They're high-tailin' it!" he yelled.

Far behind a plunging, picketed horse near-by a rifle cracked. Jigger Jones pitched out of the saddle. Cursing, Donnigan ran toward the plunging horse, thumbing fresh shells into his .45.

LEAD screamed past him. The horse broke free. The man stood there in the open, blasting shots as Donnigan charged.

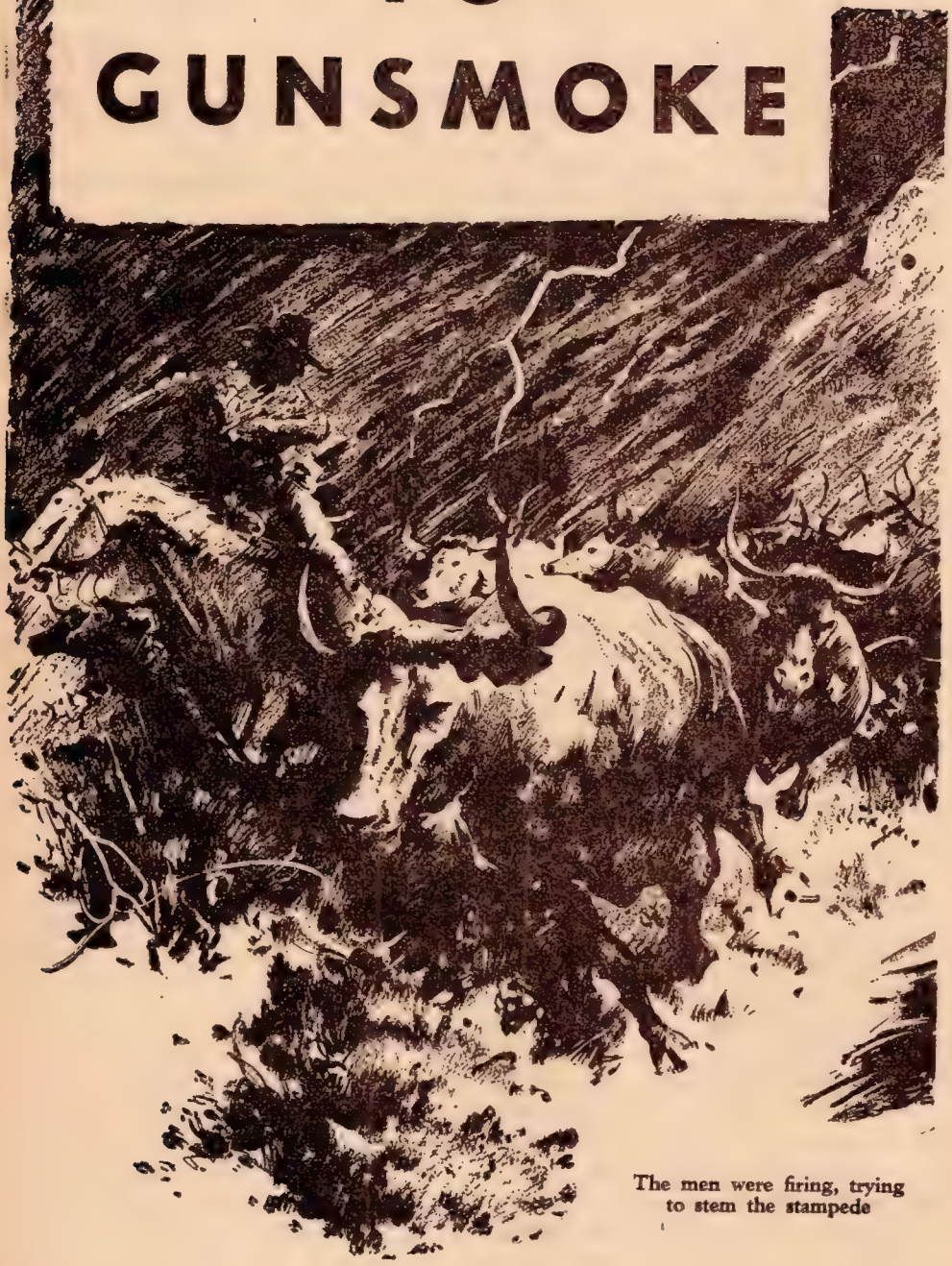
Lead struck Donnigan's shoulder a terrific blow. He staggered, stopped, gritted his teeth, aimed carefully and drove in three shots.

The third one was not needed. The man was already going down.

Turning dizzily, Donnigan looked for more trouble. But the firing had died away. The wagon had overturned on the steep side of the nearest hill. The team was kicking in its harness. A shrill Indian yell came from the other side of the flat

(Please turn to page 125)

BORN TO GUNSMOKE



The men were firing, trying to stem the stampede

When John Bentley rode home to rebuild his shattered life, the crooked politicos gave him his biggest welcome, plus the job which, they figured, he could do best: Selling out his own neighbors, his own kinfolk—and himself!

By
THOMAS
THOMPSON

No Comeback for a Killer!

HE STOOD at the back of the saloon and waited, a tall, lean man with brooding eyes and thin, tight lips. His face, rough-whittled from the timber of trouble, was drawn with the hopeless knowledge that he would have to kill again or be killed, and for a second he wondered which would be best. Outside in the town the street was deserted, for the news had spread fast and in the Pettigrew house up the street a woman was crying. Johnny Bentley waited and perspiration ran down the crease of his back.

The sound of bootheels on the boardwalk was slow and measured and Bentley listened to the past walking up to meet the present. He felt his pulse slowing, felt the old familiar vacant touch of fear in his stomach. The saloon door opened and Rent Savage was there, young, arrogant, tough. "Think it over, Rent," Johnny said softly. "A man's a long time dead."

The kid had his hand on the butt of his gun and there was a smile on his handsome young face. "I told you I'd get you, Bentley. I had six months in a stinking jail to think it over."

"You should have had sixty years, Rent," Johnny said. "Be thankful your brother had pull enough to get you out. Forget it, boy."

"You ratted out on me, Bentley. You know what a rat gets."

"I told you not to pull that job, Rent. I told you I wouldn't back you up."

"You had to go pious. You and that psalm-singin' wife of yours."

"Watch it, Rent!"

But there was no stopping it. He had known that as soon as he learned Rent Savage was out of jail. A man couldn't outlive a gun past. People wouldn't let him. He had tried. He had done it for Gail, hoping she would come back to him, marry him again, hoping they could start over. The gnawing emptiness was gone from the pit of his stomach now. He saw the kid's fingers tighten around the butt of the gun. There were two flashes of flame, the stinging smell of powdersmoke. Bentley dropped his gun back into the holster and he felt like he was going to cry. The kid was sprawled on the floor and young red blood was soaking into the flooring. "I'm sorry, Rent," Johnny Bentley said softly. He stood there and waited for the mob to break through the door.

The roar of voices was all around him, pressing in on him, smothering him. These were the good people of the town: the Law and Order League, headed by Claude Bentley, Johnny's brother. And Claude was there, serious, unyielding. As hard and unyielding as their father had been that night fifteen years back when he threw Johnny and Claude's mother out of the house. And that too had been the old battle between the "good" and the "bad," Johnny supposed disgustedly. He waited until they had packed the body of Rent Savage out of the saloon and he saw the marshal coming with a hammer and nails and a board to put across the door. They were closing him up and running him out, and all he had tried to do was play the game their way.

The saloon was deserted and the splotch of new blood was there on the floor. The marshal, a short, pudgy and perspiring man, wiped his face with his sleeve and tossed the hammer on the bar. "There's a private bottle back there, Marshal," Johnny said. "Help yourself."

The marshal refused to meet Johnny's eyes but he went around the bar and

poured himself a generous drink. He peered over the top of the shot glass and said, "You made a mistake coming back here, Johnny."

"It's a free country," Johnny said. "There's no price on my head."

"I ain't hankerin' to get mixed up in family squabbles, Johnny," the marshal said. "I just got a job to do, that's all."

"Sure," Johnny said. "You've been fair enough."

The marshal poured himself another drink and watched Johnny Bentley with tired, watery eyes. "We'll take inventory tomorrow," he said. "We'll hold a sale and your creditors will get what there is, share and share alike. After that there won't be nothing holding you, Johnny. Maybe it would be smart if you drifted along."

No, there's nothing to hold me, Johnny thought. Nothing except the thing I came here to do and the thousand dollars I owe Senator Mallory and a thing called pride. I promised myself I'd try it her way—play along with the goodie-goodies. And this is what it gets me. A swift feeling of defeat numbed him. The good ones were too bull-headed to give a man a chance, and a man got fed up with the bad ones.

"You say something?" the marshal said.

"Nothing worth hearing," Johnny said. "Let's close it up and get it over with."

HE WAITED while the marshal took one last look around the ornate saloon and gambling casino which had been destined to fail since the day it had opened two months ago. Folks here didn't want Johnny Bentley to succeed and they had showed it by staying away in droves. Only Senator Mallory had been willing to put money into the venture, for the senator was a man who didn't hesitate over a pedigree if there was a possible dollar to be made. The senator was neither good nor bad in this sharply divided town. He was neither, because he was both.

Johnny went out on the sidewalk and watched the little lawman drive the last nail to seal the door. A few men walked wide around them and paused a second to watch and one craned his neck trying to see the legal notice on the door, trying hard not to let Johnny see what he was doing. Without looking around Johnny said, "You want me to read it to you?"

The man flushed deeply and hurried on down the street.

"The kid bragged all over town he was after you, Johnny," the marshal said. "I know it was an old fight and I ain't chargin' you with nothin'. But I ain't askin' you to stay, neither."

"All right, Marshal," Johnny said. He watched the marshal move down the street, taking his hammer and his little sack of nails, and he heard the depressing hush that falls on a town when there has been a killing.

For a while he stood there on the sidewalk looking up and down the dusty street of the town that had blossomed and died and was now getting another chance at life. He felt a sudden kinship toward this weather-warped accumulation of false-fronts and dusty streets and clapboard houses with their eternal hollyhocks and Chinaberry trees. It had been home once and the Bentleys had been the big name family here. But divorce had disrupted it and split it apart to where Johnny and his own brother had become total strangers, raised in a totally different way. Johnny didn't like thinking of divorce. His own from Gail was too recent. He started walking down the street.

Down by the dusty plaza a half dozen young men sat on scarred benches in the scant shade of a sycamore, whittling, making old brands in the dust with broken

twigs. They were talking of other killings in the old days, Johnny knew, talking as if they were men of eighty instead of in their late twenties. A dozen heads lifted and a dozen pairs of eyes looked at Johnny Bentley and flicked away. He had gone to grade school with most of these men. None of them spoke to him. He was "that wild Bentley kid who run off with his no-good maw and then come back years later and married Gail Crawford and ruined her life for her." Their conversation died completely as he passed them and flared up again behind his back. From the tail of his eye Johnny saw the marshal standing in the shade of a building, watching him.

The Pettigrew house was a block up the street and he knew Gail was there. He wanted to go to her and tell her how it was, but he knew it was no use. Twice before he had tried to explain how it was that a man might have to kill and he had failed both times. After their marriage he had quit hired gun fighting and gone to sheriffing, because he thought it would please her, but politics, he had found, could be dirtier than paid gun fighting. He had played it straight in the only way he knew, quitting when he found he was taking orders from Jim Savage, the political boss of three counties. He had needed to kill a man in the quitting and he had sent Rent Savage, Jim's young brother, to jail. And that night he had come home to find the note saying she was divorcing him. There wasn't a hell of a lot a man could believe in.

He didn't notice the four riders coming down the street until they were nearly upon him. Claude Bentley, Johnny's brother, rode slightly out in front, like an army officer leading a troop. He was as tall as Johnny, much darker, more handsome. He had thin lips and Johnny couldn't remember ever having seen the man smile. He was exactly as Johnny remembered their father, and that in itself was enough to make Johnny dislike the man in spite of the blood tie.

Behind Claude, Johnny recognized Gabe Petlin and Bert Stokes, neighboring ranchers, and bringing up the rear, slouched in his saddle, was Clay Farnsworth, Claude's hulking, slow-witted foreman. The men with Claude didn't look up, but Claude reined in. He didn't dismount and he sat there looking down, his dark eyes devoid of expression. "Is it plain enough now we don't want you around here?" he said.

"It's plain enough," Johnny said, "but it don't mean I'm leaving."

"There was another gun-slinger in town once who didn't want to leave," Claude said. "The Law and Order League decided to let him stay here permanent." He nodded toward the cemetery on the knoll back of town.

"Your concern touches me," Johnny said.

"I don't give a hang what happens to you and you know it," Claude said, his thin lips tilting at the corners. "But I do care what happens to Gail."

"So do I," Johnny said.

"Then get out of town," Claude said. "Since when did you start worrying about Gail?"

"Since she and I decided to get married," Claude said. "Do you want it any plainer than that?" He reined his horse and rode down the street at a canter and Johnny stood there, his mouth suddenly dry, his legs weak.

THE marshal pushed himself away from the building and walked slowly across the street, his holstered guns swinging with the movement of his bowed legs. He stopped in front of Johnny and spat into the dust. "Like I said," he said, "I don't want to get mixed up in no family squabbles. There's a train through here at six tonight."

"Give my regards to the engineer,"

Johnny Bentley said. He turned and walked rapidly toward the two-story building half way up in the next block.

Like most of the rest of the people in this country, Johnny had a very small regard for United States Senator Phineas Mallory. But the senator was the one man in the country from whom Johnny could get a job, and right at the moment a job was what he wanted. No half-pint underpaid marshal and no wife-stealing brother could run Johnny Bentley out of town if he made up his mind to stay. And he had made up his mind, he knew. His heart had taken care of that. He climbed the outside stairway that led to the senator's office on the second floor and he entered the room without knocking.

The man behind the desk was soft and round and pink, a cherub-faced man with twinkling blue eyes and skin that looked as if it had been rubbed too hard with a rough towel. There was a signet ring on the little finger of his left hand and he used a stubby holder for his cigar. He looked steadily at Johnny Bentley and without moving his eyes he pulled open a desk drawer and drew out a paper. He shoved it across the desk to Johnny. "Did you come to pay this?"

"That's right," Johnny said. The paper was a note for one thousand dollars, ten per cent interest compounded semi-annually, due on demand. He saw the surprise in the senator's eyes. "If you'll let me work it out."

"If I'll what?" The senator leaned forward, his eyes searching Johnny's face.

"You told me you had a chance to sell a thousand cows to the government for Indian beef. You'll be needing a trail boss to get 'em to the agency, won't you?"

"Sit down, Johnny," the senator said. "The heat's bothering you."

"Give me my chuck and tobacco money and credit the rest against this note I owe you."

"Why?"

"Because I need a job."

"Your brother practically had a nervous breakdown when I loaned you money to go into business. What do you think he'll say if you go to work for me?"

"Have I ever given a damn what my brother said?"

The senator teetered in his chair, his fingers pressed together, his lips pursed. "Have you talked to your ex-wife about this?"

"Why should I?" Johnny snapped.

"She doesn't like me."

"Who in hell does?"

"She thinks I have a deal with the Indian Bureau where I can sell beef and she can't," the senator said.

"Well, have you?"

"Let's just say I have connections," the senator said. "I'd be glad to use those connections to help Gail and your brother if they'd let me."

"I don't give a damn about any of that," Johnny said impatiently. "Do I get the job?"

"Certainly, my boy," the senator said. "I need a trail boss and you're the best in the country. I'll be glad to have you."

"I want a contract in writing," Johnny said.

"Don't you trust me?"

"No," Johnny said.

The senator laughed. "That's what I like about you, Johnny. We understand each other." He took a sheet of paper from the desk and handed Johnny a pen. "Here, write your own terms."

"You're hiring a trail boss, not a gun," Johnny said.

"That's right," the senator said. "Trouble is bad for votes. I'll do everything I can to avoid trouble."

"You're too agreeable," Johnny said, putting down the pen. "What's the catch?"

"None at all," the senator said. "I just want a good man, is all. And I figured maybe with you working for me,

Gail and your brother might listen to reason. Of course, I don't know just how Jim Savage is going to take it, but I guess that's personal between you and him."

"What's Jim Savage got to do with it?"

The senator was smiling. "I guess I forgot to mention that Jim Savage is the one doing the buying up at the agency."

Johnny was on his feet. "Why damn you—"

THE senator spread his hands and heaved a sigh. "I doubt that your ex-wife and your brother would get very far selling beef to Jim Savage. Not after today."

The perspiration was thick on Johnny's forehead. "Listen, Senator, they had nothing to do with it, either one of them."

"Of course they didn't," the senator said. "That's why I'd like to help them out. You tell them to pool in with me."

Johnny pushed the pen and paper back across the desk. "Go to hell, Senator."

The senator shook his head. "Grow up, Johnny," he said. "You and I don't have to lie to each other. I need you and you need me. I'm the only man in the country who can deal with Savage and you know it. I can sell cows to Savage and he won't ask where they came from. You can deliver those cows."

Johnny was standing by the window and he could feel the anger racing through his veins. Once he and Jim Savage had been friends, but that friendship had turned to hatred and now to a killing and someday it would have to lead to another killing. He glanced down at the street and saw Gail come out of the Pettigrew house and meet Claude Bently on the front porch. They stood there a moment, talking, and a thousand memories of that six months of marriage flooded through Johnny's mind. He saw Claude take Gail's arm and the two of them walked into the garden and around the house. The senator's voice was soft. "Are you afraid of Jim, Johnny?"

"To hell with Jim!"

The senator rustled the papers on his desk and looked up, smiling. "I hear your ex-wife had her name legally changed back to Crawford." He clicked his tongue against his teeth. "And now I hear she's thinking of changing it back to Bentley again."

Johnny was across the room in one quick stride. His hand shot out and gripped the senator's shirt front and then his fingers relaxed slowly and he dropped his hand to the desk. The senator smoothed his shirt with steady fingers. Johnny sat down in the chair. "How crooked a deal is it?" he asked wearily.

"It's not crooked," the senator said. "All I want is a regular trail fee for delivering them. I've already talked to Stokes and Petlin about it."

"They coming in with you?"

"They're thinking about it." The senator leaned forward. "I wouldn't fool you, Johnny. You know as well as I do that I'm getting a few dollars kick-back from Savage, but what the hell difference does it make? The kick-back comes out of Savage's pocket, not out of this end. You know yourself that every ranch around here is mortgaged to the hilt. Damn it, man, I'm just trying to help folks out a bit and I get the same kind of response you got when you tried to run a legitimate business in this town."

"Maybe you ought to just hire some guns and take the cows away from 'em," Johnny said.

The senator smiled. "If that's what I wanted, Johnny, I'd do just that. But I'm after votes. I don't deal in bullets."

"But Savage does."

"So he does," the senator said. "That's why I like to stay on the good side of him and I'd like to see the others stay on the good side of him, too. Dead people can't vote. I found that out a long time ago."

He stretched and yawned and patted his mouth with the back of his hand. "Make up your own mind, Johnny. I'll give you a damn' good job. Nobody else will." He cracked the knuckles of his hands. "And without a job, Johnny, I don't think you'll be staying around this part of the country."

"I'll think about it," Johnny said. He got up and hurried down the stairs and behind him he could hear the senator coughing softly into a handkerchief.

He knew the senator well enough to know he was one of those strange in-between politicians who did a lot of good and still managed to feather his own nest. The country was full of such men in high office. This looked like a typical deal with a senator helping his neighbors sell their cattle, making a few dollars for himself, and nobody hurt. But Johnny wanted to talk to Gail or Claude and find out what they knew.

The bitterness between the Mallorys and the Bentleys went back a long ways, and Gail's father had always been on the side of the Bentleys. Both Claude and Gail had inherited the stubbornness of their fathers and it wasn't likely they'd be pleased about dealing with Senator Mallory. But they had to sell cows. The range country was glutted with longhorns and another winter would sink every ranch in this part of the state. He hurried up the street toward the Pettigrew house, a strange mixture of emotions tormenting him. Gail answered the door immediately when he knocked and he felt the old thrill sweep through him, just as he did every time he saw her.

SHE was a tall girl, deeply tanned from sun and wind, a tan earned riding her own range on the little ranch which she owned and managed with a startling efficiency. That had been part of the trouble with their marriage, Johnny knew. Gail was not a girl who would ever depend completely on a man. He tried to grin at her and she stood there looking at him, accusing him with her eyes, not inviting him in. He said, "I know what you're thinking, Gail, but you're wrong. I gave the kid every chance in the world to back down."

"You don't have to make excuses to me, Johnny," she said. "Not any more."

"I'm not making excuses," he said. "I thought you'd want to know."

"You've got your freedom, Johnny," she said. "That's the thing that always meant most to you. What you do now is of no concern to me."

"You know that isn't so, Gail. You were my wife."

"Please, Johnny." She started to close the door and he blocked it with his foot.

"I want to talk to you," he said, and again he had that feeling of desperate aloneness that he always had when he was around her lately. She was so completely self-sufficient, so coldly aloof. And yet she wasn't, he knew, and the memories of the first few months of their marriage were strong. "This is business, Gail. About the beef the senator is driving up to the agency."

"Claude and I will never deal with Senator Mallory or Jim Savage," she said. "Is that what the senator sent you to find out?"

"The senator didn't send me to find out anything," he said hotly. "All I know is the way the set-up is you've got to sell to Savage or nobody. That's the way it works." She knew that as well as he did. War feeling still ran high in many places and the government had found it practical to have a middle man between the Yankee government and the drovers from the south.

"It's time someone exposed the pay-off and graft that exists with men like Savage and Senator Mallory," she said.

"It's too big for you, Gail," he said. "It goes all the way back to Washington."

"All the more reason to break it."

"But why stick your neck out?" he insisted. "You sell your beef, the Indians get fed. Sure, Savage and Mallory make a couple of bucks on the deal, maybe, but so do you."

"It's graft," she said. "Claude and I both feel that way and we mean to fight it."

"You're butting your head against a stone wall," he said, and suddenly he was sick and tired of arguing. "Damn it, Gail," he said, "don't we ever agree on anything?"

"It looks like we don't, Johnny," she said.

"Gail, you know Savage. You're walking right into all kinds of trouble."

"We won't back down from it," she said.

"Then let me pitch in with you."

She looked at him and he had never seen her lips so set, her eyes so accusing. It seemed to him that she had aged and become more coldly emotionless since the divorce. "If Claude and I have to hire guns," she said, "it seems to me we would be better off hiring someone who had never worked for Savage." She closed the door firmly in his face and for a second he felt he would have to break down the door and take her and shake some sense into her. The temper ran out of him and he turned and walked back to the street. Claude Bentley met him at the gate.

The brothers stood looking at each other, one tall, dark and serious, the other blond and muscular, his face lined with living. Those who knew them said they were exact replicas of their parents: Claude a carbon of his father, Johnny the duplicate of the mother who had raised him. "What do you want here?" Claude said coldly. "Money for that ticket out of town?"

"I came here to try to talk some sense into you," Johnny said. "You can't fight Savage. You don't know how to fight that way. He'll make a fool of you!"

"So I should hire you to do my fighting?" Claude said. "Sorry, I don't deal with killers, and that includes you as well as Jim Savage."

"I ought to knock your teeth down your throat."

"I'm sure that would accomplish a lot."

Johnny fought down his temper. "Claude, for God's sake be sensible. Go ahead and pool with the senator and let him worry about delivering and greasing the palms of the right people. You've got to sell cows. You know that."

"There's more at stake than a herd of cows, Johnny."

"Why in hell don't you quit talking like a preacher?"

"That train still passes through at six," Claude Bentley said. "I advise you to be on it." He turned and walked swiftly through the yard and up onto the porch. He didn't knock, but let himself in like a man who belonged there. You damn, stubborn fool, Johnny Bentley thought, and immediately he was thinking of how much Gail and Claude were alike and there was a knife in his chest. Go ahead, little girl, he thought. Go ahead and marry the great man. He's handsome, he's successful, he's honest and God-fearing, just like his father was. He's everything you say I'm not. And he'll make you as rotten a husband as my dad made for my mother.

He turned and walked swiftly down the street, fearfully aware of the fact that he hated his own brother.

HE SPENT the rest of the afternoon calling on his several creditors, and it wasn't pleasant. Men could be pretty brutal when money was involved, he had found. "I know you need it, Bert," he told the storekeeper. "Everybody in this neck of the woods needs money."

The storekeeper fiddled with his black sateen sleeve guards. "I won't get twenty

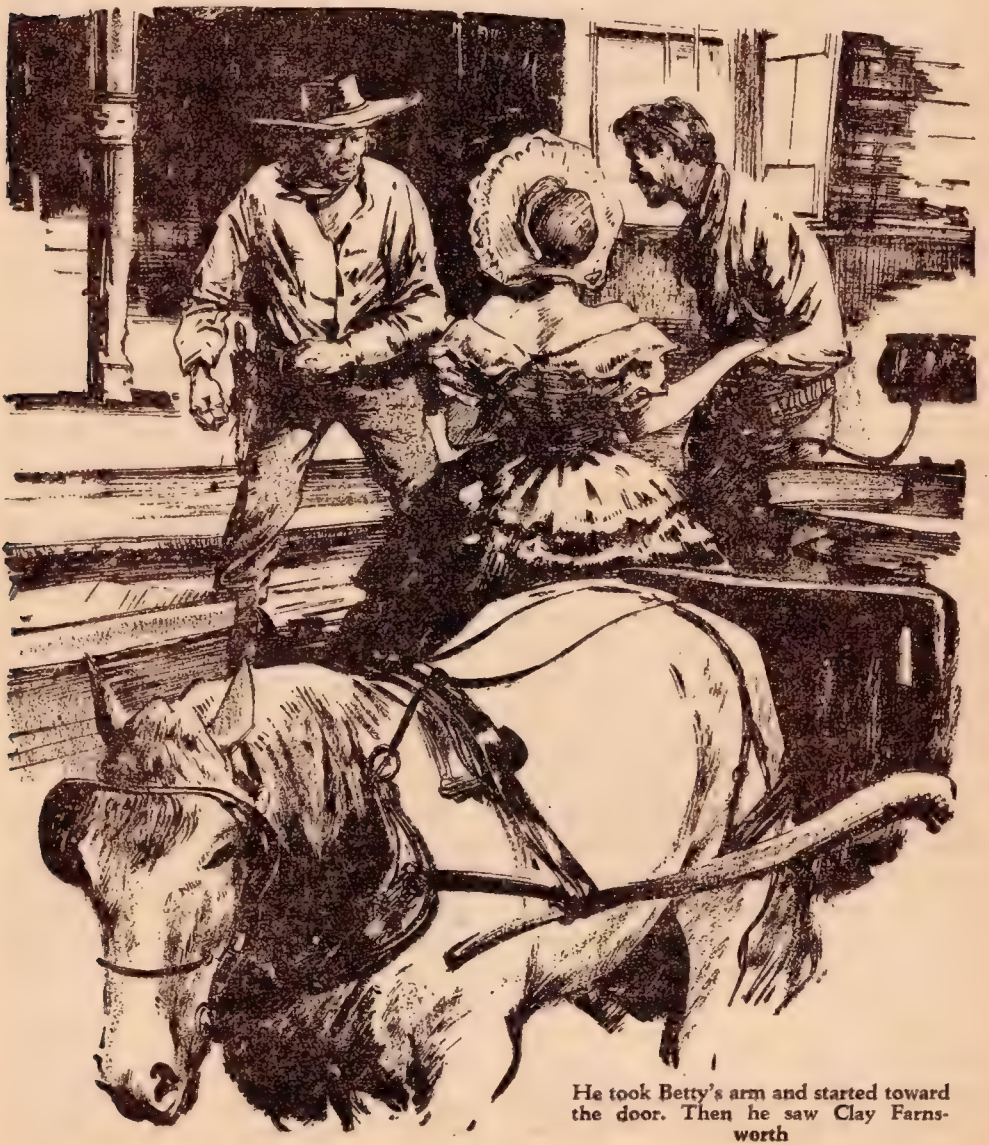
cents on the dollar from the sale. Damn it, I don't want to cause you no trouble—"

"I told you you'd get it, Bert," Johnny said, and it was hard for him to keep the anger out of his voice. He wasn't used to begging for favors.

The storekeeper rubbed his nose and stood his ground. "If you had a job, Johnny. I'd be willing to work something out if you had a job."

"I'll have a job," Johnny said.

It was twilight when he left the last place and the loneliness in him was partly sundown and mostly real. There was woodsmoke in the air from a dozen kitchen stoves and the lamps were glowing in the only other saloon in town. He walked by his own place, the windows dark, the board nailed at a slant across the door, the white court order hanging in the stuffy air. Damn it, a man had a right to make a living. He stepped off the



He took Betty's arm and started toward the door. Then he saw Clay Farnsworth

sidewalk to cross the street and was nearly run down by the buggy. He started to yell at the driver, saw who it was and shoved his hat back on his head. "Now look, Miss Mallory," he said. "A girl like you don't have to run over men to impress them."

"You do to impress some," the girl in the buggy said. She smiled and exposed her even white teeth. He grinned back at her in spite of himself and she scooted over on the seat. "Come on in," she said. "I'll give you a ride to where you're going."

"The town will talk," Johnny said, holding up a warning finger.

"Good," the girl said. "Have you ever seen a duller, more stupid place?"

"I believe I have," Johnny said. "For a short time I was night watchman in a morgue." He climbed into the buggy and they drove down the street together and a dozen people turned to watch. They always watched when Betty Mallory, the senator's daughter, came to town. No one was ever sure what she might do next.

"Where to?" Betty said. "Ma Campton's boarding house?"

"That's where I been living," Johnny said.

The girl tilted her head and looked at him obliquely. She was a beautiful girl—a little too beautiful for this town. Her hair was honey blonde, her eyes an amazing shade of dark violet, her lips full and red. She apparently didn't give a damn for anybody or anything and her entire bearing said so. She delighted in wearing shoulderless gowns cut much too low and once she had ridden into town, astride, wearing a pair of men's jeans. Men talked about her behind her back and bragged of how they knew her and one had actually been out with her one night after a dance. He came back with two black eyes and little to say. She smiled at Johnny and said, "I've been looking around town for you, Johnny."

"Why?" he said.

She smiled, an honest, open smile. "Because I like you."

"You like all the men," he said. "Now what is it you want?"

"It's been a rough day for you," she said. "I wanted to tell you I was sorry about it."

"I've gone broke before."

"I wasn't thinking of money."

"Forget it, will you?"

SHE leaned against him and the heavy lids of her eyes drooped slightly. Her voice had a husky quality and she spoke with her moist lips nearly immobile. "You're the one who needs to forget, Johnny. Maybe I could help you."

"Sorry," he said. "No sale."

"The men I wouldn't spit on I have to beat off with a club. The man I want won't even look at me."

"You're a brazen little witch," he said.

"That's the only kind of woman who could ever get along with you," she said. They had turned in a side street lined with poplars, and the shadows were deep. She leaned toward him and for a moment he was looking straight into those amazing dark eyes. He saw them close and her lips pouted. He reached over and took the lines from her hands.

"I'm hungry," he said. "Come along and if my credit is still good at Ma Compton's I'll buy you a meal and pay you for the sympathy."

She wasn't angry. She settled back in the seat and watched him closely, and her eyes were smiling. Once she reached up with a forefinger and brushed a whisp of hair back along his temple. "You might as well give up, Johnny," she said. "I always get what I want."

"That's the trouble with you," he said. "You're spoiled rotten." He turned the buggy left, into a pleasant lane-like street and pulled up at the big three-story house

in the middle of the block. Before he could get down and help her, Betty had bounced lightly to the ground and was standing there, fluffing the wrinkles out of her skirt. He looked at her and shook his head, but as he turned to lift down the tie weight he couldn't supress the grin that spilled out of his eyes. He had been raised by a woman like this one. They were a hell of a problem, but you never forgot them.

He took Betty's arm and started toward the door. Then he saw Clay Farnsworth, Claude Bentley's foreman, step out of the shadows. For a moment he hesitated, not wanting to speak to the big man, but Clay moved out in front of him and blocked his way. Johnny felt a quick anger run through him but because of Betty he sidestepped around the man. Farnsworth blocked his way again. "I want to talk to you, gun-slinger," he said. He shoved his hand against Johnny's chest.

Johnny slapped the hand away. "You can call me by name, then."

Farnsworth reached into his shirt pocket and took out an envelope. "Here's the ticket," he said. "The train's due in half an hour."

"That's fine," Johnny said. "Have a good trip."

"Don't get cute with me, gun-slinger," Farnsworth said. "I'm goin' with you to see you make that train."

"You'll have a long wait," Johnny said. He took the envelope from Farnsworth's hand and tore it across the middle and handed the two pieces back. "Get out of the way."

Clay Farnsworth was big. His face was broad and scarred, his chest like a barrel. The three top buttons of his shirt were open, exposing a mat of hair, his shoulders sloped into a bull neck. There was a wide grin on his thick lips as he lunged forward. Johnny had figured the move seconds before it started. He drew his fist back, waist level, and leaned forward, his entire weight behind the blow. His fist sunk wrist deep in Farnsworth's middle and the big man doubled over, the breath whistling across his lips. He was standing there gasping, bent over that way, when Johnny took Betty's arm and escorted her through the door. She smiled up at him and said, "A nice bit of counter-campaigning, my hero."

"Campaigning?"

"Of course," she said. "Why do you think your brother is so anxious for you to get out of town?"

"He loves me. He'd like to see me have a nice trip."

"And he would like to have you a long way from here when he starts campaigning against my dad. The goody-goodies who'll support your brother are a bunch of ostriches. If you're not around they won't have to remember that their lily white candidate has, to say the least, a not so lily white brother. I doubt if they want your mother brought into it, either."

He glanced at her quickly and could read nothing in her eyes. "I'll see about getting something to eat," he said. "Wait for me."

"Forever," she said.

HE WENT into the kitchen, troubled by what she had said. It was the first inkling he had that his brother Claude was interested in politics, but it all added up. The man who ran against Senator Mallory would have to make a real fight of it. So all that fancy talk of Claude's was as much hot air as all the rest of the political hot air. You're looking out for number one, just like our pious, psalm-singing father used to do, aren't you, Claude? And Gail would love being a senator's wife. She could be sedate and dignified.

The anger in him grew. The political situation all over the country was rotten, he knew. So rotten that it was being accepted as the regular way of doing busi-

ness, and any politician who didn't make a few dollars for himself was a damn fool. And Claude Bentley, Johnny knew, was no fool. The government was giving land away by the millions of acres to railroads that might never be built. Everyone of any stature had a "connection" of some kind in Washington. Damn you Claude, he thought, why didn't you come out and admit to me what you were up to? You'd have gotten a lot further with me. He pushed open the heavy door and went into the steamy kitchen.

Ma Conway, as usual, was supervising the cooking. She was a fat woman, as broad as she was tall. Her face was surprisingly young, her hair snow white, her hands and feet tiny. She was noisily sampling a kettle of soup directly from the ladle and she didn't look around when Johnny came in. "You want to pay your bill?" she said.

"I want to," he said, "but I can't. So I want to run up a bigger one."

"You're more like your mother every day," Ma said.

"Martha always used to tell me you were the most wonderful woman in the world," Johnny said. He had always called his mother by her first name.

"Martha was as full of blarney as you are," Ma said. She picked up the corner of her apron and blew her nose.

"I've got a lady friend," Johnny said. "She's hungry and so am I and I've got one dollar."

Ma sniffed loudly, went to the door, opened it a crack and peeked out. "She's no lady," she said, looking at Johnny, "but she's as pretty as your mother was. What can I feed you?"

"Something fancy, eh?"

"You don't know much about women," Ma said. "That girl is a steak-eater if I ever saw one." She fumbled in her apron pocket and handed him a wadded bill. "Here. You might need this."

"Nothing doing, Ma."

"Take it and shut up," she said. "Your mother loaned me the money to get started in this business." She gave him a husky shove toward the door and then slammed the door behind him, nearly knocking him down.

Betty was sitting in the lobby, talking to two of her father's Bench B punchers. The two men looked up when Johnny came down the hall and immediately glanced away. They were young men, clean cut, men who looked as if they knew their jobs. But they were not local hands, and that was just one more thing this town had against Senator Mallory. He went outside to hire his help. Men made an issue of that without ever admitting that very few local men would have worked for the Bench B if they had the chance. The two punchers went into the dining room and Betty smiled and said, "Do we eat?"

"We eat," Johnny said.

"Good," she said. "I always find my men easier to handle when they have a full stomach."

There were two long tables in the dining room where food was served family style and along the south wall, near the windows, were four smaller tables, set up for two. Johnny guided Betty toward one of these and he saw the men at the big tables pause momentarily in their eating. Some of Gabe Petlin's hands were there, a few of Bert Stokes', but none of Claude Bentley's. There were two merchants to whom he owed money; they glanced up, then back at their plates. The entire reception was one of coldness. "I should have worn my coat," Betty whispered.

Ma Conway herself came to wait on them, puffing and wheezing as she always did, her face shiny with perspiration. She put a bowl of soup in front of Betty, another in front of Johnny, and as she leaned across the table she mumbled, "Heads up, Johnny. You're gonna have company."

Johnny straightened up and touched his lips with his napkin and he saw Clay Farnsworth, backed by two of Claude Bentley's hands, standing in the door, glancing around the room. The big foreman's eyes met Johnny's and he started walking slowly toward the table, the Bentley men at his heels.

JOHNNY continued with his eating, every muscle alert now, knowing he was in for trouble. He knew Farnsworth was standing close behind his chair; he heard the deep silence in the room. He looked across at Betty and saw that some of the color had left her cheeks. She was smiling back at him and there was no other show of emotion on her face. "Good soup," Johnny said. His voice sounded loud in the room.

Farnsworth's voice was heavy and thick with confidence. "We been trying to clean up this town, gun-slinger," he said. "This place here is reserved for decent folks. I reckon you and your painted doll better go on down to the saloon to do your eatin'."

Everyone in the room heard the insult. Johnny saw the tiny spots of color in Betty's cheeks, he felt his own anger surging into life. He remembered another time when he had beaten a man half to death for insulting his mother in a similar manner. Then he was pushing himself back from the table. Two more of Bentley's punchers rushed into the room. The men at the tables put down their knives and forks and waited.

Had he been wearing a gun this would have been an old and familiar thing. A planned fight, one man picking it, four more to back it up. So this is your Law and Order League, is it, Claude, he remembered thinking, and then he pushed against the table, spilling the hot soup in Betty's lap, and he was down on the floor on one knee. He heard Betty's scream, knew it would give him an extra second, and he pushed himself up, his shoulder driving hard against Farnsworth's middle.

Farnsworth went spilling backwards, but the four punchers backing him up came charging in. This was the way they wanted it. From the tail of his eye he saw Betty shove a chair in front of one of the men, saw the man go down, and then one of Claude's punchers was on his back, an arm locked around his neck. Farnsworth had regained his balance and now he came rushing in and his big fist splattered against Johnny's lips.

Twice more he felt that fist mangle his face while he was held helpless from behind and then the little town marshal was rushing across the room, his gun drawn, his mouth making words Johnny couldn't hear. He tried hard to break the grip of the man behind him, kicked out and knew he had found the man's shin.

The marshal was in front of Farnsworth, holding him back, yelling for the men to break it up. The grip around Johnny's neck slackened and he wrenched free and threw himself at Farnsworth. He caught the marshal's gun barrel in the pit of his stomach. "I said break it up," the marshal said.

"Come on outside, Farnsworth," Johnny said. His mouth was full of blood, his shirt and coat sleeve badly torn, his hair hanging in his eyes. "Just come on outside, that's all I ask."

"There'll be no more of this," the marshal said quietly. "Come along, Johnny." He pressed harder with the gun.

"They came in here looking for trouble," Johnny said.

"I got a floater on you, Johnny," the marshal said quietly. "You're a troublemaker, you got no job."

Johnny pushed the gun away from his stomach. "My brother learns his politics fast, don't he?" he said.

"I told you I didn't want to get mixed up in no family squabbles, Johnny," the

marshal said. "You come along easy now."

Betty had walked over and was standing beside the marshal. The soup had stained her skirt badly and her cheeks were flushed with anger. "You can't run him out of town," she said hotly. "He's got a job. All he's trying to do is pay off some of the money he owes these gospel-slinging hypocrites. He's been a better citizen than any of you ever since he's been here, and if you want to run him out you'll have to run the whole Bench B out, because he works for us and he's one of us." The two Bench B punchers had gotten to their feet and now they started walking over toward Betty. They would back her up, regardless of what she said.

"You workin' for Bench B, Johnny?" The marshal's watery eyes were steady.

At that moment Claude Bentley and Gail Crawford walked into the room. Gail's face was ashen white and there was a thin sneer on Claude's lips. Johnny felt a sudden driving urge to talk to Gail, tell her what had happened, and he knew just as suddenly that she wouldn't believe him. These men who had picked this fight were the pillars of the town, the Law and Order League, headed by Claude Bentley. Johnny had seen another political set-up once masquerading under the banner of decency. It had caused him to kill a man. He looked straight at his brother and he said, "That's right, Marshal. I'm working for Bench B. I like my grafting out in the open where I can see it."

Claude Bentley's dark eyes were hot with anger. "You're asking for trouble, Johnny."

"Am I?" Johnny said. "Then before I get it, take my advice. You better keep in good with Jim Savage, because if you was somehow to win the election you'd be needing an old hand like Jim." He took Betty's arm and pushed by the marshal. As he went through the door he thought he heard Gail speak his name, softly. But he wasn't sure.

2

The Devil Sends a Crew

THE BENCH B, one of the oldest ranches in the country, sprawled in its own spring-watered valley at the foot of the Saddle Mountains. It was big, but in the beginning it had been even bigger when Poke Mallory, the senator's father, pushed west with fifty cows, a desire for solitude and a hatred for fences. That was three years before Thad Bentley, Johnny and Claude's father, came here.

Neither Johnny nor Claude was old enough to remember those first few years, but gossip and campfire tales hadn't let the story die. Poke Mallory and Thad Bentley were born to be enemies. Poke drank a quart of forty-rod a day and went on a drunk come Saturday night. Thad was one of the first to preach complete prohibition in the state. Poke had a voice that could be heard across a quarter section and a fist the size of a ham. Thad was quiet, reserved. Every man on his crew carried a Bible in his saddlebag but it didn't slow the speed of their guns.

Both men had a penchant for freedom and independence and a desire to grow. So Thad Bentley, twenty years younger than Poke Mallory, started spreading out. He always moved under the cloak of legality and respectability, and it wasn't until after his death that final surveys proved just how much land Thad Bentley had stolen from his neighbors. But he had been a righteous man, and now, with the passing of time, he was remembered as such.

The present senator was a young man

in those days, a lot like his father. He remembered all of it and grew up hating Bentleys. The Bench B started to grow again, at the expense of the old Bentley Pitchfork spread, and young Phin Mallory, always a man to get around, found it worth while to dabble in politics. He progressed fast, and although he had never polled a vote in this part of the country, this part of the country had been too sparsely settled to defeat him in his race for United States Senator.

These were pork barrel days and days of opportunity for a man in high office. Phin Mallory took a page from old Thad Bentley's book and started taking advantage of every opportunity that came along. In time he started making his own opportunities. Claude Bentley, Gail Crawford, Bert Stokes and the others hated him soundly and did everything they could to discredit him. But he had figured his position well. He didn't waste his time making speeches to men who hated him. He made his speeches to men who didn't care much one way or the other, and he was serving his second term.

Johnny Bentley knew these things and as he sized them up, one against the other, it looked to him as if the Mallorys were no more crooked than the Bentleys and vice-versa. But actually, even though he carried the name, Johnny wasn't a Bentley. He had given that up the day he decided to go with his mother. He had come back here, hoping to make a go of a legitimate business and win Gail back, and he had found a Bentley bucking him, a Mallory trying to help him.

THE moon came up and flooded the long valley and he glanced over at Betty, sitting beside him on the buggy seat. The moonlight touched her blonde hair and he was aware that she was pretty, nothing more. She hadn't said a word since leaving town, and that was unusual for her. She glanced up now and saw him looking at her and she smiled and said, just as if she had been reading his mind, "You *are* sort of an outcast, aren't you, Johnny?"

"What made you say that?"

"I guess it's because I recognize a kindred soul," she said. "Do you realize I haven't a friend in the world except maybe Ma Conway?"

He pulled the team to a stop. The Bench B valley was there below them and lights spilled from the ranchhouse, flickering between the leaves of the row of windbreak poplars. "You sound like you're feeling sorry for yourself," he said.

"As a matter of fact, I'm not," she said. "At the moment I'm quite happy. I've never had a man fight for me before."

"Don't get any ideas," he said. "I'm taking this job because I need it."

She reached over and squeezed his arm. "Don't be afraid of me, Johnny," she said. "I'll never hurt you."

"Look, Betty," he said, and there was a tenderness in his voice that he hadn't meant to put there. "To me this is a job. I owe your dad some money. I believe in money. Nobody ever does a damn thing unless there's something in it for him. There's something in this for me and there's something in it for your dad, or he wouldn't be hiring me."

"Dad isn't so bad."

"He's as crooked as the next one."

"I know," she said, "but honest about it. Your God-fearing dad was the biggest land hog this country ever saw."

"Don't expect me to stick up for my dad."

She was thoughtful a long time and then she said, "I guess that's your trouble, Johnny. You haven't anyone to stick up for. As I said before, you're an outcast. Sort of a lonesome life, isn't it?"

"I've never minded it."

"Then why did you come back here?

Didn't you expect to make up with your brother or find some of the old-timers who would accept you?"

"You talk like a book."

"Did you expect Gail to re-marry you, Johnny?"

Gail Crawford

"Why don't you shut up?"

"Sorry if I hit a sore spot, darling," she said. "I'll be careful where I punch from now on."

"We better get going," he said. "I want to talk to your dad tonight and get it over with."

"Dad will be glad to have you."

"Why not?" he said. "He'll get some of his money back."

They were silent the rest of the way to the ranch and from time to time he glanced at her and always found her watching him. It made him nervous. When they pulled up in the ranchyard he stepped down from the buggy and waited for her. She put out her arm and didn't move until he had helped her down. For just a second he held her in his arms and the perfume of her hair was in his nostrils. He thought of Gail.

"Go talk to dad," she said. "I'll fix us something to eat. I didn't particularly enjoy that meal at Ma Conway's." She started off toward the kitchen and the only thing he could think of was that he was surprised that she could cook.

He knocked on the front door the third time before Senator Mallory answered and then he stood there, the glow of his cigarette lighting the rough planes of his face, and he watched the surprise in the senator's eyes. But the senator was not a man who let surprise throw him. As casually as if he had been expecting this very caller he said, "Come in, my boy. What brings you here?"

"Your daughter," Johnny said bluntly.

The senator was wearing a red flannel robe with silk-faced lapels. Some of his cigar ash had dropped on the silk. He closed the door silently and led the way to his office, a small room just off the living room. The house was comfortably furnished but a bit ornate with it's fringed lamp shades and its marble busts of forgotten heroes. The senator sat down in a leather chair and pressed the tips of his

fingers together. His pale blue eyes were amused under the shaggy white brows. "What happened?" he said. "Did you find out that your pious brother was knee deep in politics too?"

"Look, Senator," Johnny said. "Let's cut out all the conversation. If you want a trail boss, I'll take the job."

THE senator chuckled. "Only now I'll make the terms, my boy," he said. "If you don't like them, you can refuse them. Fifty dollars a month for three months. I furnish the horses and the grub."

"You wouldn't squeeze a man much, would you?"

"Of course he wouldn't." Betty's voice startled both of them. She had entered the room silently and when Johnny looked up he hardly recognized her. She had put on a frilly apron, no bigger than a postage stamp, and the heat from the stove had flushed her cheeks and dampened the short curls that clung to her forehead. "A hundred dollars a month," she said, "and a bonus for delivering the herd in good shape."

The senator's jowls reddened. "You'll please stay out of this, Betty."

"I'll make my own deals," Johnny said flatly.

"The deal is all made," Betty said. "Come and get your steak. Dad, would you like a cup of hot milk?"

"Hot milk be damned!" the senator said. He walked over to the desk, got a bottle of brandy and drank directly from the bottle.

"There's a few other conditions, Senator," Johnny said.

"They can wait," Betty said. "The steak's getting cold." She took Johnny's arm and ushered him into the kitchen where the table was set for two. Two candles furnished the only light. He looked at her and shook his head, but the smell of the frying steak kept him from walking out. He sat down to eat.

She made excellent coffee, he noted, and the steak was above average. The potatoes were fried just right, with a touch of onion to flavor them up. She ate sparingly, watching him, and in time he quit wolfing his food and became conscious of her. She got up then and refilled his cup with hot coffee and as she stood behind him she said, "Quit worrying about it, Johnny. Dad's on the level on this deal. He has to be."

He set his cup down quickly. "What do you mean by that?"

"Politics mean more to him than money," she said frankly. "I know my dad. He actually would like to see the folks around here sell their beef—and that includes your brother. Pulling his opponent out of bankruptcy would make good campaign fodder, wouldn't it?"

"I wouldn't know," he said.

"Beyond that," she said, "dad promised me he was on the level in this." She reached out with the habit that was beginning to become annoying and brushed his hair back along his temple. "I wouldn't want you mixed up in a crooked deal, darling, any more than I would him."

"Look, will you leave me alone?"

"Un-uh," she said, shaking her head. "I can't." She turned her back and put the coffee pot on the back of the stove and he expelled his breath in a heavy sigh.

He was having his third cigarette, his fourth cup of coffee and enjoying it when he heard the riders coming. It sounded as if there were two, and the dog kept up a yammer that didn't subside until he heard the senator open the front door and call to quiet the animal. After that there was a mumble of voices, with only the senator's words intelligible. "Come on in, boys. I've waited a long time to have you come here friendly. Come on in."

Johnny looked at Betty and she was

smiling and the cigarette lost its taste. He got up and pushed aside the door that led to the dining room and now he could hear them plainly. He recognized the voice of Gabe Petlin and Bert Stokes.

He saw the men go into the senator's office and he followed. The senator looked up quickly, unmasked annoyance on his face, and then he waved to a chair. "Come on in, Bentley."

"I'm in," Johnny said. "Go ahead. I want to hear this."

Stokes, a thin, nervous man, figited on his chair. "I don't know about this, Senator—"

Gabe Petlin was a more positive man. He was tall and lean, an old-timer in this country. At one time he had been a foreman for Johnny's father and then he had started out with a small herd of his own. He sat erect in his chair and there was a gun strapped around his middle. "To hell with it!" he said. "I've got a mortgage coming due and not a cent to my name. If I can sell cows short of killing my own mother, I want to sell cows."

"You're a sensible man, Petlin," the senator said. He puffed deeply on his cigar and got it going again. "Remember I'm in the same boat. I'm in the same shape as you are."

"But you've got an income," Stokes whined. "We're just plum up agin the wall, Senator."

The senator had pushed a paper across the desk. "There's the letter. The agency can handle up to two thousand steers over a period of time. We can drive 'em up there and hold 'em, selling them off in lots of fifty or so, or, as Jim Savage says here, he'll buy 'em from me in one lump take." The senator grinned. "I admit Savage is doing this for me because of a couple of little favors I did him once. Maybe they're favors I wouldn't do again, but what the hell, boys. As long as the condition exists, why shouldn't I cut my friends in on it and take advantage of it?"

PETLIN shifted his gun belt and his gimlet eyes bored into the senator's. "How much for the privilege, Senator, long as we're putting our cards on the table?"

The senator shrugged his heavy shoulders. "I'd expect a man to remember his friends."

"No man buys my vote, Senator," Petlin said.

"I'd like to have a chance to earn your vote, Petlin," the senator said.

"Let's talk this here thing out a bit," Stokes complained.

Gabe Petlin was on his feet now, his hand resting casually on his gun butt. He jerked his head toward Johnny. "Where does Bentley, here, fit into the picture? He used to work for Savage, didn't he?"

The senator coughed uneasily. "I hired Bentley as trail boss," he said. "You all know he's had plenty of experience and after today I doubt that you can say he's connected with Savage in any way." He tried to smooth things over and his voice was hearty. "How about it, Johnny boy? If we make up a combine pool of all the stock in the valley, can you handle the herd?"

"I'll handle it if it can walk," Johnny said. "Good-night." He gave Petlin a long, searching look before leaving the room.

He went directly outside and he was satisfied with what he had heard. It fitted in perfectly with his own appraisal of life. Petlin and Stokes had a chance to make a dollar and save their places, so politics be damned. They were all the same and there wasn't a man alive that didn't have his price. But Claude and Gail Crawford hadn't been at this meeting, he had to remind himself, and the thought disturbed him. What the hell, he thought. Claude has his price, too. He'll take a chance on losing Pitchfork if he thinks it will make him senator.

The bunkhouse was a hundred yards

from the house, at the edge of the horse pasture. He could go there, he supposed, and find himself a bunk and turn in, but he hesitated. He had all his possessions in a warsack which he had thrown in the back of the buggy before leaving town, and he went toward the wagon shed, intending to get the sack. He had to pass by the corral and he saw Stokes' and Petlin's horses tied there and then he went on to the shed. He was rolling back the monorail door when he became aware of a third horse, ground-tied out behind the barn. Old habit made him note every detail of his surroundings.

The early night dew had already settled and there was a well-defined path through the deep grass around the side of the barn. It disappeared in the dust of the barnyard. He built a cigarette and cupped the match flame in his hands, bending over as if to shield it more. He scanned the ground carefully. There were too many tracks to make anything out of it.

He went carefully around the barn, then, to where the horse was standing, and now the helpless feeling of not having a gun was strong on him. He knew for sure that someone was either spying on that meeting in the house or someone had followed him here planning to make his exit from the valley a permanent thing. He stood with his back pressed against the wall of the barn and tried to make out the brand on the horse. It was too dark for that.

In time he became satisfied that whoever it was who had ridden this horse here was over by the house or by the bunkhouse. He walked back boldly, opened the wagon shed and got his gear. Reaching inside the sack he quickly found his gun belt and holstered gun and he strapped it around his middle with a swiftness born of long practice. The gun felt good as it settled into place. He slipped out of his torn coat and put the coat on top the war sack and let himself back outside without closing the shed door. Quietly he drew his gun and rolled the cylinder around to a full chamber.

MOVING cautiously, he headed toward the line of windbreak poplars, keeping in the moon shadows until he was to where the light from the senator's office window momentarily blinded him. The night was humid and he could hear the whining voice of Stokes, the more droning, positive tones of Petlin. There was an argument going on, but it seemed to be between Stokes and Petlin, with the senator taking only a small part. That was like the senator. He had made his proposition and now he would sit back and let these two ranchers sell themselves on the idea.

A breeze started from nowhere, setting the poplars in motion, and the window light threw a speckled pattern on the dusty ground. Johnny moved forward swiftly, toward the house, and he saw the motion there by the window. The spy was there, all right, listening to the conversation that went on in the room. It would be Claude, he figured, or even more likely, Clay Farnsworth. The old feeling of an impending fight was strong on him and he resented it. He wanted to get away from that feeling.

The voices in the room quieted, as if the men had reached some sort of agreement, and he saw the spy move closer to the window, keeping down, close to the side of the house. Johnny moved with the stealth of long practice, his drawn gun in his hand now. There was a patch of clear light spilling from the window and at either side the shadows were dark by comparison. He worked downwind and moved in, the gun cocked. He was only three feet away when the figure under the window straightened. It was Gail.

He knew if he spoke her name she would cry out, so he did the only thing he could. Dropping his gun noiselessly in its holster, he waited until she had turned

away from him and then he threw himself forward, his arms locking around her, his hand over her mouth. He heard her mumbled outcry, felt her teeth sink into the edge of his hand. He held her closer, forcing her ear close to his lips. "Be still, you fool! Do you want them to know you're here?" She fought against him and he pushed her in front of him, forcing her to walk toward the windbreak of trees. She bit him again and he winced against the pain.

When he released her finally he gripped her arms again, holding her helpless. "Gail, I'm only trying to help you."

"You Bench B gun-slinger!"

"I hired on as a trailboss," he said, "not a gunfighter. You know that."

"You know it will lead to trouble."

"Gabe Petlin and Bert Stokes don't think so. They're pooling with the senator, aren't they?"

"They're making a mistake."

"They're your oldest friends," he reminded her. "Do you think they'd do anything crooked?"

"They can't do it! It would mean we'd lose everything we have fought for."

He put his arm around her shoulder and this time she didn't fight against him. There was tiredness and bewilderment in her voice and he wanted to hold her in his arms and talk to her. "Gail," he said quietly, "you need cash and so do they. Here's a way to get it. It's as simple as that."

"It's rotten," she said. "The whole thing is rotten. As long as men like the senator cater to Jim Savage and his like it will continue to be rotten."

"He's not catering to Savage," Johnny said. "He's taking advantage of the fact that Savage owes him a favor, that's all. Politics go like that, Gail, you know that. It wouldn't make any difference who was in office."

"That isn't so!"

"Well, then, go along with the times. It will straighten itself out. It's got to!"

"Not by itself it won't," she said. "It takes men who are willing to stand up and expose graft and fight for what they believe is better and right."

"Is that one of Claude's speeches?"

"Suppose it is?" she said hotly. "You should be proud that you have a brother who can make speeches."

"I've heard that one too often," he said. "It sounds good before election, but the candidates never seem to remember the tune after they're in office."

"Johnny, haven't you got faith in anything?"

"Yeah," he said. "In Johnny."

HER VOICE was desperate. "Don't you see what it means? If Gabe and Bert pool with the senator it's just encouraging Jim Savage and his kind to make other deals. Can't you see they're stealing money from the government itself?"

"No," Johnny said, "I can't see it. There's a fixed price the government will pay for Indian beef. I'll admit you can't bid direct and get any place, but you can sell through the senator. Savage will take your herd in one lump delivery, if you play it his way. Otherwise you'll have to hold them for months and any profit you get will be used up."

"If we play it his way." Her voice was scornful. "Can't you see it's not a matter of profit? Haven't you one decent scruple left in you, Johnny?" He heard the catch in her voice and he knew she was crying. He tightened his arm around her shoulder and turned her toward him.

"Gail, forget all this. Come away from here with me. Gail, tell me you don't hate me."

She buried her face against his chest and now he could feel the sobs shaking her. "I don't hate you, Johnny. I never have. But your life has been such a waste."

"It won't be any more," he said. "There's a million things to see and a million things to do, if you're there to do them with me."

"I've got to stay here and fight this thing out."

"Then let me fight it out with you," he said. "I'll get rid of Savage and the senator, both, if you want me to. You say what you want, Gail."

She pushed away from him quickly, as if she were just now aware of where she was. "Can't you ever forget guns and killing?"

He gripped her arms roughly and shook her silently. "I can't forget you, Gail. I love you. I want you to come back to me. Give up all this crazy talk about politics. You and I, that's the only thing that matters."

"You're the only thing that matters to you," she said.

"Gail, how can you say that?" His arms were around her and he was holding her close, feeling the pressure of her body, remembering . . . "Gail, doesn't that six months we had mean anything? Can't you remember?" She was cold, distant, as remote as if she had never known him. A violent anger and stirring passion seized him and he found her lips, crushing them with his kiss, forcing her head back until she couldn't move away from him, and every memory he had was in that kiss and he held her until he was breathless and trembling and weak.

He let his arms drop and he wanted her to come back into his arms and talk to him and tell him the things he had wanted so much to hear. Instead she stepped back and slapped him hard across the face. "You filthy beast," she said. "You haven't changed." She started running toward the barn and he could hear her sobbing. He stood there rubbing his cheek, looking after her.

She had ridden away back toward the town before he moved. Gabe Petlin and Bert Stokes came out of the house and he saw them there on the front porch, shaking hands with the senator. They were going to pool with the Bench B, and Johnny didn't blame them. It made good sense. But where did that leave Gail? With Claude, he decided, making a lily white fight so that they could eventually wind up in a political position of their own. He felt a sort of admiration for them, even though he couldn't understand them. He started walking toward the bunkhouse and he nearly collided with Betty Mallory standing in the shadows of the windbreak. He pulled up sharply, his voice angry. "What are you doing here?"

"Just wanted to see that you got tucked in all right," she said.

"I'll make out," he said. "I won't need your help."

He glanced at her and she was smiling. Almost a wistful smile, he thought. "All right," she said. "Good-night, you filthy beast." She blew him a kiss and walked slowly toward the house.

JOHNNY BENTLEY had always had a God-sent ability to lose himself in work, and he did that now. The entire Saddle Mountain country was open range and always had been, in spite of the bloody feuds that had sprung up and died, for these ranches ran longhorns and up-breeding of the herds hadn't started as yet. And it was this very fact that had put the country into the deep pit of depression in which it now found itself.

Eastern markets had had a taste of feed-lot beef and the range-fed longhorns were a drug on the market. Perhaps the Indian Bureau had meant to feed high-bred beef to the Indians, too. Johnny didn't know. But one thing was certain. This sudden opening of a practically unlimited market for range cattle was a salvation for the country and Johnny, along with the senator and some of the others

saw no reason to question or bite the hand that had suddenly offered food.

Johnny was in his saddle early and was one of the last men to come to the chuck-wagon out on the round-up at night. He grew leaner and more taciturn and even a bit surly, but he won the respect of his crew and even of Gabe Petlin and Bert Stokes. Petlin and Stokes never spoke to him unless it was necessary, but secretly they agreed that he was as good a round-up captain as they had ever seen work.

When he was at the ranch, which was seldom, he ate in the cookshack with the crew and rarely saw Betty, and he didn't want to see her. The knowledge that she had seen his attempted reconciliation with Gail had upset him more than he wanted to admit, and on those rare occasions when he needed to talk to the senator he waited until he was sure Betty was in town. He heard a dozen remarks passed about Betty and at first he let them pass and then all at once they irritated him. "Will you keep your damn mouths shut about that girl?" he snapped one night at the fire. The men fell silent and after that they never spoke of Betty when Johnny was around.

IT WAS over two weeks before he saw Gail again. A bunch of the boys had brought in a large gather from down in the bottoms and had just turned them in with the day herd when Johnny spotted three C Cross cows in the gather. He had warned the boys to avoid picking up either C Cross or Pitchfork stock, but in an operation as big as this it was impossible to avoid mistakes. He had just started to speak to Gabe Petlin about it when he saw a young kid, not over sixteen, riding in hard, sliding his pony to a stop. The kid didn't give Johnny a chance to speak. He threw himself from his saddle, his face white with rage. "Damn you to hell, Bentley!" he cursed. "I been followin' that herd half the day. If you think you can pick up C Cross stuff and get away with it—" Johnny hardly realized the kid was clawing for a gun until the weapon was half drawn.

Johnny was on his horse, directly in front of the kid. He wheeled the animal, spurring with his left foot, and jerked his right foot from the stirrup. The kid was rushing toward him and caught the full impact of Johnny's boot square in the chest. He went down hard and Johnny was out of the saddle and on top of him.

The kid fought like a wildcat, but he was no match for Johnny. In seconds Johnny had twisted the gun out of his hand and jerked the kid to his feet. He started slapping the kid's face then, not hard, but he kept it up until the boy started to whimper. He released his grip and turned toward the circle of stony-faced men who had surrounded him. "Who in hell is this jinglebritches?"

"Name of Hollingway," Bert Stokes said lamely. "Works for Miss Gail."

"Well she better teach him some manners," Johnny said. "He's liable to get his damn head blown off. Cut those C Cross things out of the herd and I'll deliver 'em back, along with a piece of my mind." He stepped into the stirrup and pulled himself into the saddle. The kid was standing there, wiping his nose on his sleeve, still whimpering. "Go on over and wash your face, Hollingway," he said. "Then get to hell on home before I take a pair of chaps to you." The kid did as he was told.

The kid went on ahead a good half hour before Johnny started out with the C Cross cows. The men, if they thought it strange that the boss had decided to make this delivery himself, said nothing about it. They all knew of the marriage that had ended in dismal failure and they knew Bentley was a good man to leave alone. Petlin and Stokes sat there, watching him head off across the flats, and Gabe Petlin shook his head. "I've come damn near to

likin' that boy," he said, and then he dismounted and started to unsaddle. Like the others, he wanted no part of family squabbles.

Johnny rode slowly, enjoying the first relaxation he had had since the round-up started. It had gone well and another week would see the herd of a thousand longhorns heading up the three-hundred-mile trail to the Cheyenne Agency. A dozen times, looking down from some rise on a scattered bunch of C Cross or Pitchfork stock, Johnny had wished those two brands were going along. But recent activity had convinced him that Gail and Claude had not changed their minds. C Cross and Pitchfork were going up the trail, all right, but they were going on their own. Secretly, he wished them luck.

He dropped down into the familiar valley, pushing the three steers along at a slow pace, and old memories were strong on him. Here he and Claude had played as kids, disagreeing even then, but enjoying the disagreement. And here he had first met Gail Crawford, a serious girl, old for her years, even as a child. He supposed he had loved her from the first day he had seen her with a white starched pinafore and her dark curls hanging to her waist. She had always represented everything that was good and clean, and if such a thing was possible, he was in love when he was ten years old.

IT HADN'T been a happy childhood for him and perhaps that was the reason his memory of Gail had always stayed with him. He was happy when he was with her. But at home there was the growing tension between a staid and pious father and a mother who loved life. There was the growing gossip, not without foundation, when Johnny's mother, in a final revolt against the hypocrisy of her husband, started living her life too openly. And then the night when Thad Bentley, apoplectic with rage, had thrown Martha Bentley out of the house. Johnny, with a mind of his own even then, had chosen to go with her.

He had never had any regrets about his decision. For the next few years he grew up in various saloons while his mother sang in ornate halls downstairs. He remembered when she started drinking and he learned to call a dozen men uncle. He taught himself crooked gambling by hiding himself under green top tables. He drifted from job to job and learned to hire his guns, and he watched his mother live her life until it killed her. And immediately he felt the loss and he came back home to court Gail, just as he had always gone to Gail when he was in trouble as a kid.

There hadn't been time to explain to her how he had lived or what he was doing. He told her he had a job on a ranch —a job that paid well—and that was true A woman wouldn't be interested in range wars. He wouldn't leave her alone and no woman could have doubted the sincerity of his love. He remembered her as a bride, pink and white and as pure as he had always pictured her, and he remembered how he had been afraid as soon as he realized she was his. And then a month of ecstasy and the gradual facing of the truth as she realized what his work on the ranch consisted of. And finally the realization that they were from two different worlds, the long hours of explanations that couldn't be accepted and at last the bitter quarrels and the grasping at straws, trying to save a marriage that was wrong from the first. The only time he ever struck a woman was during that time. He slapped Gail and knocked her into a chair. "No one calls my mother that," he said. They were from different worlds, a thousand miles apart.

He drove the cows straight down toward the corral there below him, feeling a little foolish about it now. The logical thing would have been to push them well

back onto C Cross range and turn them loose. But his entire reason in bringing them back himself had been that he wanted an excuse to see Gail, and now he had to admit it to himself and to her. A man came out of the barn and he saw it was Clay Farnsworth. Johnny hazed the steers along, but he was alert now, watching Farnsworth. Clay was a man who liked trouble. Johnny waved and he saw Farnsworth put down the bridle he had in his hand.

"Some beef for you, Clay," Johnny said. "I'll trade you these three for three Bench Bs." He was grinning when he said it.

Clay Farnsworth was a slow-witted man. He had been kicked in the head by a horse and sometimes he seemed to have a lot of trouble forming thoughts and words. He stared at Johnny and then grunted, "All right. You brought 'em back. You're a hero. Get out."

"Gail around?" Johnny said.

"Not to you she ain't," Clay said. "I said get out."

Johnny stepped down from his saddle and the gun on his hip was obvious. "Look, Clay," he said patiently, "I'm not looking for trouble and neither are you. Forget it."

"You'll get trouble," Clay said. "Plenty of it." He spat and nodded his head and hitched his belt. Johnny gave the man a quick glance, trying to decide what he meant. Just at that moment the door of the house opened and Gail was standing there on the porch, shading her eyes with her hand. Johnny started walking toward her and he saw her stiffen and clench her hands at her sides.

HE TRIED to be pleasant but she wouldn't let him. She gave him a long look, her eyes bright with anger. "Did you come here to gloat?"

"Over what?" he said, puzzled.

"Do you think you can force me to join up with you by pistol-whipping a sixteen-year-old boy just because he works for me? Do you think driving three of Claude's new hands out of town will force us into anything?" He had never heard such vehemence in a woman's voice.

"Gail, what in the devil are you talking about?"

"It must make you feel pretty good,"

He used the water for a mirror to examine the cut on his temple

she said, "beating a child near to death."

"No, it doesn't," he said, his own temper flaring into his voice, "but it doesn't make me feel good to have a child shove a gun in my face, either."

"You didn't need to half kill him!"

"Since when has slapping a little sense into a kid been half killing him?"

"You're rotten, Johnny. You're rotten all the way through. Get out of here and stay out, because the next time you come back I'll have men here who speak your language." She slammed the door hard, but he was too quick for her and his shoulder batted it aside, spilling him into the room. He stopped short, his stomach twisting into a knot. The kid, Hollingway, was stretched out on a couch. His head was swathed in bandages and his eyes, swollen shut, were purple pouches of flesh. He had been beaten completely beyond recognition. Johnny stopped short and when he raised his eyes he was looking down the twin barrels of a shotgun. "I said get out," Gail said, and her voice was deadly soft. He knew Farnsworth was there in the door behind him, a gun in his hand.

"Gail, I didn't have anything to do with this. Ask the boy."

"And tell your beloved senator that if he thinks he can scare Claude and me into selling out to him, he has another think coming. Just remember, Johnny Bentley, that it was your own outfit who started it."

Johnny had dropped to one knee in front of the kid. "Who did this to you, kid?"

The kid rolled his head and tried to speak through mangled lips, but no words came out. One eye opened a slit and the pupil was round and staring and blank.

Johnny's face was white. "Gail, believe me, I'll get to the bottom of this."

He never saw the blow start. He only felt the ripping tear of Farnsworth's gun barrel across the side of his face. Blood spouted across his eyes and ran into his mouth and he was on his knees, fighting to keep himself upright. He felt Clay's heavy boot crash against his ribs and he heard Gail pleading with Farnsworth to quit it. He was nearly out when Farnsworth jerked him to his feet and threw him out the door. He sprawled there in the yard and his hand went to his empty holster, and then Farnsworth was jerking him to his feet again, slapping him, pushing him toward his horse. "The lady said get out, didn't she?" Farnsworth's breath was blasting against his face.

Gail's voice was sharp. "That's enough, Clay. We don't want his blood on our hands. Get him on his horse." He barely remembered riding away, but he did remember that Gail had been crying and he kept saying to himself, over and over, You're wrong about me, Gail. You know I had nothing to do with this. You must know. The landscape started spinning around his head and he had to clutch the saddle-horn with both hands for support.

The nausea passed in time and his head throbbed wickedly. He saw that the horse, left to guide itself, had turned on the town trail and he was no more than half a mile from the city limits. He pulled up at a horse trough and dismounted and for a long time he bathed his face and his head and when the water was quiet he used it for a mirror to examine the cut on his temple. He needed a drink, bad, and he needed to think. He remounted and rode into the nearly deserted town and stopped in front of the saloon. He was reeling when he walked through the door and the bartender stared at him closely. "Drink, Peeny," he said, and he gripped the bar for support.

He wasn't even sure there was anyone else in the place. He didn't care at the moment. He downed the liquor and poured another and now his stomach was burning and the pain was leaving. He saw the bartender staring at him and he said, "No, it

wasn't the Law and Order League. Are you sorry?"

"I don't want no part of your fight," the bartender said quickly. "You and me always got along."

A voice behind him said, "Still having trouble with folks, are you, Bentley?"

Johnny felt a tightening of the muscles along his jaws and his hands spread along the bar. He looked up, straight into the bar mirror, and saw the grinning face of the man standing directly behind him. He hadn't seen that face for a long time, but he remembered it. He let his breath out slowly and said, "How are you, Bettencort?"

"Fine," Curt Bettencort said. "When did you give up sheriffin'?"

"About the same time you gave up rustlin', I reckon," Johnny said.

CURT BETTENCORT laughed. "You always was quick with an answer. A drink for old times, Sheriff?"

"The name is Johnny Bentley."

"I remember your name," Bettencort said.

"Then use it."

"Why not?" Bettencort said. "You want that drink?"

"Sure," Johnny said. "I'm thirsty." He lifted the heavy shot glass off the top of the bottle and poured himself a drink, then raising his glass, said, "To the luck that's kept you alive this long."

"To the shot that missed me," Bettencort said. There was a strained silence and Bettencort, grinning with his lips, said, "You want to try shooting at me again?"

"Why should I?" Johnny said. "That was two years ago."

Bettencort tilted his head on his thick neck and laughed. He was a big, ruggedly handsome man with a close-cropped black beard and intelligent gray eyes. "For a lawman," he said, "you wasn't such a bad egg. Too bad you had to go spoil it all."

"Forget it, will you?"

"Why not?" Bettencort said. He downed his drink and thumbed the bottle toward Johnny. Johnny shook his head. "Anything personal in refusin'?" Curt asked.

"If there was I'd say so," Johnny said.

"I reckon you would," Curt said. He stood there, grinning, his thumbs hooked in his sagging gun belt. "You and me might as well get along," he said, "seein' as how we'll be seein' each other."

"Meaning just what?"

"Meanin' I'm fixin' to get me a job here-abouts."

Johnny poured another drink without realizing he was doing it. He had known Bettencort for a long time and he had known him intimately, once, over the sights of a gun. He had been part of the set-up when Johnny worked for Jim Savage—Bettencort stealing cattle, Johnny getting paid to look the other way. He knew Bettencort wasn't a man who traveled alone and he wasn't a man who worked for himself. If Bettencort was here so were the Hannifer brothers and Pinto Fletcher. And if they were here it was because Jim Savage had wanted them to be here. "There's none of your kind of work here, Curt," Johnny said.

"You got a job, ain't you?" Curt said. He was still smiling. He downed a quick drink, his eyes never leaving Johnny's face. "You wouldn't have a place for me and the boys, would you, Bentley?"

"No," Johnny said. "I wouldn't."

There was a pleased leer on Bettencort's face. "You ain't worried about what you did to Rent Savage, are you, Bentley? Because if you are, forget it. I don't give a damn about Rent, you know that." He ran a forefinger under his nose. "Sure you ain't got a place for me and the boys?"

"I told you there's no place for you here, Bettencort."

"Just shows you what you don't know, Bentley," Curt said, hitching his belt. "I

already got me a job." He swished whiskey around in his glass. "Seems a couple of outfits runnin' C Cross and Pitchfork irons been having a peck of trouble with an outfit knowed as Bench B." He looked straight into Johnny's eyes. "I hear tell some of your boys beat hell out of a C Cross kid and drove some of Pitchfork's new hands out of town." He downed his drink. "With your outfit actin' up thataway you can't blame C Cross and Pitchfork for hirin' on some good fightin' hands, now can you, Bentley? You should know the score."

"Damn you to hell, Bettencort," Johnny said slowly.

Bettencort glanced at Johnny's empty holster and then at the cut on his temple. "Looks to me like you come in from the direction of C Cross just now," he said. "Good thing for you I wasn't there. That little gal that owns the place just don't know how to get rough enough. But you know that I do."

"I'll kill you, Bettencort, if you mix in this."

Curt was grinning broadly and the bartender's face had gone white. Johnny glanced over his shoulder and saw the two Hannifer boys and Pinto Fletcher leaning against the wall. The Hannifers, alike as two peas, had their hands on their guns. Pinto Fletcher was smiling, a toothpick drooping from one corner of his mouth. His arms were folded across his chest and Johnny remembered the knife he kept in his loose sleeve. Curt Bettencort's mouth was still smiling but his eyes were deadly. "I got orders not to start nothin' with you, Bentley," he said, "unless you start something first. You want to start something?" He glanced at the Hannifers and Pinto Fletcher and jerked his thumb toward the door. "Get out, Johnny," he said softly. "I'm checkin' the bet to yuh. If anything happens on this drive it's bound to be your fault. I'll be waiting for your play."

Death of a Child

IT WAS an old pattern, disgustingly familiar to Johnny. You rode into a country where trouble was brewing and if it didn't flare up fast enough so that one side or the other would hire your talents, you made it flare up. A rider for one faction or the other was killed. Or a kid was beaten half to death or new hands were scared off. Johnny Bentley knew how it worked. He had worked it himself in those days before he married Gail Crawford and tried to settle down. Now Gail and Claude had hired themselves a gun crew that made a business of double-dealing and murder. A sickening thought struck him.

Suppose Claude knew what he was doing? Suppose he had made a deal with Jim Savage to double-cross the senator. Or, on the other hand, suppose the senator, realizing he would be unable to deal with Claude and Gail, had asked Jim Savage to send this gun crew here? Johnny sunk his spurs and headed for the ranch.

He slid his horse to a stop in front of the main house and saw Betty standing on the porch. She waved to him and started out to meet him, then stopped when she saw the freshly scabbed-over cut on his temple. "Johnny, what happened?" He pushed by her and kicked open the front door. The office door was closed and he pounded on it heavily. Betty had followed him in. "Dad isn't here, Johnny."

"Where is he?"

"Didn't you get his note? He sent it out by one of the men."

"Where is he?"

"He left yesterday for Ponca to be there when you deliver the herd. There

was something came up that he had to see Savage about."

He gripped her arms until she winced from the pain. "What was it about? Why did he have to see Savage?"

"Let loose of me, you fool," she said, jerking back. Her eyes were hot with anger.

"Four gunmen just went to work for C Cross and Pitchfork. I want to know what your dad knows about it."

"Why should he know anything?"

"They're ex-Savage men. They used to work for him."

"So did you," she said.

"These men are professional gunmen!"

"What's your profession?"

"If anything happens to Gail—"

"You make me sick," she said bitterly. "You're like a two-year-old kid in love with an idea. Why don't you grow up, Johnny Bentley?" She was standing directly in front of him, her eyes blazing. "You want to know why dad had to see Savage? Well I'll tell you. Dad knew Gail and Claude were about to hire a gun crew. And furthermore, he knew that your lily white brother had tried to make a deal with Savage. Dad's headed for Ponca now to try to talk Savage into buying the C Cross and Pitchfork herds at a decent price. He's trying to help your precious Gail and, if you want my opinion, that psalm-singing iceberg isn't worth helping and neither is your righteous brother and neither are you. You're fired, you hear? Get off this ranch! I'll deliver that herd myself, if need be." He saw the tears start and it frightened him. He started toward her and she slapped him hard. "Get out!"

"I'm not getting out," he said. "I'm delivering that herd, just like my contract says." He looked at her and now his temper matched hers. "Somebody is lying like hell," he said. "When I find out who, somebody is going to get hurt." He went to the bunkhouse and got his extra gun and then he went over to the corral and got himself a fresh horse. He heard Betty calling to him but he didn't stop to hear what she was saying. A few minutes later he realized she had saddled and was following him.

HE RODE swiftly, deliberately trying to lose her, but he never did. They wound down the juniper slopes into the valley and when he came near the huge massed herd he slowed his horse to a walk, knowing too well that any excitement might stampede the half-wild longhorns. A rider called Texas came out to meet him just as Betty reined in beside him.

"Say, I got a note for you from the big boss," Texas said.

"I already got the message," Johnny said. "How near finished are we here?"

"Just one more small gather from down in the south breaks. Maybe fifty head."

"What about C Cross and Pitchfork outfits?"

"Looks like they're fixin' to leave in the morning," Texas said.

"Then so are we," Johnny said.

"Johnny!" Betty's voice was sharp. "You can't get ready that soon."

"Take a couple of the boys with you and get on into town and load up with supplies," he said to Betty.

"The stores will be closed."

"Then open them."

"Johnny, we're not due to hit the trail for two more days."

"We've changed our plans," he said. "If you don't like it, why don't you get out in front of that herd when it starts moving and try to stop it?"

"Can you give me one good reason?"

"I want to be a hero," he said, and he reined his horse and left her there. A half hour later he saw her talking to two of the men and the three of them struck out toward the ranch. She'd get the supplies, he knew.

His first thought had been to strike out for Ponca on his own, deserting the Bench B and leaving Gail and Claude to make out the best he could. But suddenly he was remembering an argument he had with Gail when they were first married—an argument in which she accused him of backing away from responsibility. It had angered him beyond reason, for he had always thought of himself as a man who backed down from nothing. Later he wasn't so sure. Perhaps he had fallen into the trap of taking anything just so it paid well and was easy.

When his mother was alive he had had to fight for her, every inch of the way, and most of his life he had had to make any decisions that were made. During the last few years of her life she was like a child and the burden on him had been terrific. After her death he had only himself to look out for and the sudden release from responsibility had been more than he could handle at his age. He just about let everything slide.

Now, he realized, this entire thing was his responsibility and he had to face it. If the senator was on the level, it was Johnny's responsibility to deliver this herd. Gabe Petlin's and Bert Stokes' very existence depended on it. And if Claude was on the level it was Johnny's responsibility to be close enough to help him out, for it was Johnny who was responsible for keeping the peace between the Bench B and Curt Bettencort's gang—if that were possible.

He hadn't been overly friendly with Gabe Petlin and Bert Stokes, but he knew he had to take them into his confidence now, for they were his closest tie between himself and Claude and Gail. For the moment he chose to believe that both the senator and Claude were only playing politics—the senator hoping to get the support of Petlin and Stokes, Claude hoping to prove that a man could operate without the support of the senator.

PETLIN and Stokes were both working with the herd, along with two of their own men. When Johnny called to them they hesitated, reluctant to leave their work, and then they rode over and joined him. Petlin watched him with suspicious eyes. The word had already passed around that the herd was moving out two days early. "Kinda in a rush, ain't you, Bentley?" Petlin said.

"We want to keep close to C Cross and Pitchfork," Johnny said. His tones were clipped.

Petlin slowly rolled a cigarette and licked it. "Me and Bert figger we ain't hurtin' nobody by what we're doin'," he

Johnny Bentley

said. "It don't mean we're helpin' nobody on any shady schemes."

"Then the three of us are in the same boat," Johnny said. "C Cross and Pitchfok have hired a gun crew. They're men who used to work for Jim Savage. They say they ain't working for Savage now; the senator claims he don't know nothing about it. Somebody's a liar."

"What the hell's it got to do with us?"

"Remember the Hollingway kid?"

"What about him?" Petlin said.

"Somebody beat him half to death. Gail

figures it was Bench B men did it."

Stokes started figiting uneasily and his voice was high-pitched with worry. "That couldn't be, Bentley. Nobody laid a hand on that kid but you."

"I saw the kid," Johnny said. "Wouldn't surprise me none if he had a fractured skull. His face is beat to a pulp." He took a deep breath. "Sometimes if you want to get yourself hired in a range war you go about it by starting the war."

He expected Petlin to make some remark, but Petlin let it pass. The old man's face was dangerously serious. "You explain that to Gail?"

"I didn't know she had hired this crew until afterwards, and then it all started to make sense." He crumbled his cigarette between thumb and forefinger.

Gabe Petlin's eyes were hard. "Look, Bentley," he said, "we been workin' this round-up the way you said because it looked like you knowed what you was doin' and I wanted to sell my cows. As long as it keeps on lookin' like you know what you're doin', me and Bert will take orders. But that don't include gettin' mixed up with your family scraps or a bunch of your gun-slingin' friends or enemies, as the case my be. That clear enough?"

"That's clear," Johnny said. He had to fight to keep the temper out of his voice. "Thanks for nothing." He jerked his horse savagely and circled the herd, giving orders in a clipped monotone. He found the man Texas at the far side of the herd.

Texas was tall and stringy, a lean pole of muscle and bone. He had a weathered grin on his face, a gun on his hip. He rode alongside Johnny and spat dryly across his lips. "Lots of talk goin' around," he said.

"Like what?"

'Like you killin' that punk in town the other day has brought a bunch of gunhawks sailin' around." Texas glanced at his boss. "Like maybe you're gettin' a bunch of boys mixed up in a personal fight that ain't none of their doin'."

"Do you think so?"

"Me now," said Texas, "I don't give a damn. I like to fight." He grinned at Johnny. "If you need a hand-up, just whistle." He rode on, leaving Johnny there alone. He appreciated the first help he had been offered, but he knew a man like Texas could be as much a liability as he was an asset. A man who liked to fight could start a fight without half trying. He rode on and headed for the low hill where he could look down at the C Cross and Pitchfork bed ground. He wanted to see just how near ready they were.

HE DISMOUNTED at the top of the hill and he could see the pool herd there below him, bunched in a fertile meadow. He was mildly surprised at the size of it—about seven hundred head, he figured. He had supposed it would be more. Apparently Pitchfork had fallen on harder times than he had expected. He saw only five riders working the outfit at the moment and he thought he recognized Curt Bettencourt and Claude, but he couldn't be sure from this distance. He had a pair of field glasses in his saddlebag and he got them out and was adjusting them to his eyes when he heard the movement behind him. He turned quickly, dropping the glasses, his hand going for his gun. Gail was standing there. "Spying on us?" she said.

"That's right," he said, relaxing. "I just wanted to see how your gun crew was doing."

"I'm having trouble keeping them from paying you a call," she said. Her eyes were swollen from crying and she looked as if she were ready to collapse from fatigue. "Buddy Hollingway died about an hour ago."

He looked at her white face, her set

mouth. He saw the bitterness in her eyes and he tried to remember her as the woman who had been his wife. "Gail," he said softly, "do you really believe I had anything to do with that?"

"I believe it so much," she said, "that if I had a gun I'd kill you!"

At that moment she hated him more fiercely than she had ever loved him, he knew. He stood up and faced her and she met his eyes squarely. Slowly he drew his gun and handed it to her, butt first. "I'd rather have you kill me than believe that about me, Gail," he said.

Her hand dropped down swiftly and gripped the gun. For seconds she stood there, the gun leveled at his chest, the hatred spilling from her eyes. Then suddenly her knees buckled and she dropped to the grass and long, dry sobs shook her shoulders. He kneeled beside her and took her in his arms and she didn't resist. "Gail, you still love me."

"No!"

"You do love me, Gail."

"No I don't. I can't. I want a man I can respect. I want security."

"And you think Claude can give you the things you want?"

"Yes."

"Gail, there's more than that. Don't you remember Santa Fe? Don't you remember the nights we had in Colorado?"

"No, I don't remember," she said flatly. "I've taught myself to forget."

His arm tightened around her shoulder and he leaned closer to her. "Then let me help you remember."

She pulled away from him quickly. "Don't make me hate you again, Johnny. I've never wanted to hate you."

"Then how can you mistrust me the way you do? How can you accuse me of beating a kid to death?"

She buried her face in her hands. "What am I to think, Johnny? What am I to do?" There was a long silence and when she looked at him again her eyes were dry. "Everything connected with the senator is rotten, Johnny."

"Did you decide that for yourself or did Claude decide it when he got ready to run for senator?"

She shook her head slowly. "You can't see anything but crookedness and violence, can you, Johnny? You can't see that our government is full of graft and corruption and that the only way to clean it up is for men like Claude to make a stand, not with guns but with law and order and regular court trials."

"Are you in love with Claude or with what he says he stands for?"

"It's the same thing, Johnny."

"No, it isn't," he said, and now he was smiling wistfully. "I tried to show you that it wasn't."

"And it didn't work, did it?" she said. She stood up and offered her hand. "Good-bye, Johnny." He took the hand and held it and suddenly they were strangers. "Claude's biggest worry is that he might have to kill you some day, Johnny," she said. "Please don't let that happen." She walked swiftly to where she had tied her horse and he stood there and watched her ride down the slope, back to her gun-hung crew.

4

Boothill's Rendezvous

BETTY MALLORY arrived back at the camp a little after midnight and the wagon she drove was loaded high with supplies. Johnny hadn't turned in yet. He had been sitting by the embers of the cook fire, trying to think things out, wondering about Gail. He heard the wagon and the two riders coming and he was on his feet when Betty pulled up. He

threw a couple of sage limbs on the fire and went out to meet her. "You and your silly ideas," she said, brushing a curl off her forehead. "I had to pay two prices for this stuff."

"You're a good girl, Betty," he said.

"It's nice of you to say so, even if you don't mean it," she said. She climbed down from the wagon and flexed her arms. "Another day like this and I'd go to blacksmithing. I had to help load."

"You should have gone on back to the ranch and got some sleep," he said.

"I should have," she said, "but I didn't. I've got some news for you."

"What?"

"The big bad gunmen you were worried about are as peaceful as lambs. Your brother has made a rule that no one is to carry a gun. The C Cross-Pitchfork herd will keep at least a mile away from us. No drinking, no cussing, no fighting. Hallelujah!"

"How long do you think they'll make that stick?"

"Until you start something," she said. "So behave yourself."

"How'd you find this out?"

She smoothed her hair and half closed her eyes. "There's a handsome young cowboy who works for Pitchfork."

He felt a swift wave of anger that surprised him. He pretended to be shocked to cover it. "You didn't!"

"It all depends on what I didn't," she said, and she crooked a finger and chucked him under the chin. "You better get some of this stuff into the chuckwagon, darling. Daylight comes early."

He rousted out four men and put them to work and from time to time he glanced toward the fire where Betty was having a cup of coffee. She was a strange one and she annoyed him more than he wanted to admit. He stumbled with a sack of flour and nearly fell, right near the fire. She didn't even look up. "Keep your mind on your business, trail boss," she said. "It's three hundred miles to Ponca and all up hill."

Petlin and Stokes were both awake by the time the wagon was unloaded and Johnny told them what Betty had heard. "Like I told you." Petlin said. "You leave them old gun-pards of yours alone and they'll leave us alone." Johnny didn't answer.

The chuckwagon was loaded and spare gear stowed in the larger wagon that would serve as a bedwagon and the men had turned in again to catch a few winks before the gray daylight showed over the Saddle Mountains. Johnny took one last turn around camp, the feeling of trouble crowding him. Everything was peaceful and quiet and when the wind shifted to its two o'clock strength he could hear the distant sound of Gail and Claude's herd. He stood there a moment, letting his thoughts run back, and he heard Betty come and stand beside him. "I just let him hold my hand and kiss me good-night, that's all," he said.

"What the hell do I care?" he said.

"I just hoped maybe you would," she said.

"Well, I don't."

"I've been upset all day because I got mad at you," she said.

"I hadn't thought about it."

"You touched my sore spot when you accused dad of being in on the hiring of that gun crew."

"You know how I feel about your dad."

"In a way you're as much of a bluenose as your brother."

"What's that supposed to mean?" They had walked out of the firelight and now he was leaning back against a tree, rolling a cigarette. He struck a match and the glow of it outlined her features and he saw that her face was serious.

"I've been raised with politics and politicians," she said. "Maybe I look at things a little differently than some people do."

"You look at a lot of things differently."

"I haven't any more use for crooked politics than Gail has," she said, "but I'm a little afraid of bull-headed reform movements." She came and leaned against the tree and their shoulders touched. "When I was eight years old I watched a reform candidate personally supervise the lynching of two Negroes who had made the mistake of stating their political beliefs. I haven't forgotten it."

"So that proves there should never be any reforms?"

"A STRANGE question, coming from you," she said, "but that isn't what I meant. Reform can be as bad as graft unless reform comes along gradually. Perhaps the perfect politician would be one who had been touched by a little of both."

"And your dad is like that?"

"I think so," she said. "Dad's dabbled in some shady deals and I'm not proud of it. I've talked to him about it and he's as sick of it as I am. He's promised me there'll be no more of it and this was his first chance to show it. But Claude and Gail have bucked him every inch of the way. I trust my dad, Johnny. You wait until the next campaign and you'll see him swing the other way."

"Maybe he won't win the next campaign."

"That's always a possibility in politics," she said. "A man spends one year of his term actually working and the other three trying to make friends enough so he can be elected again. He's always going to do big things but actually he never has time. And by the time he really begins to take his job seriously and realize his obligations some reform candidate comes along and we have it all to do over again. I want my dad to have a chance to keep his promise to me."

"Getting an appointment for Jim Savage and then making deals with him doesn't fit the picture any too well."

"Doesn't it?" she said. "I can remember when Gabe Petlin and Bert Stokes were both laying for Bench B riders with rifles. Now they're working with them."

"It's a funny kind of peace if you have to buy it with crooked dollars."

"There's nothing funny about peace, Johnny," she said. "It's dead serious. You can't put a dollar and cents value on a human life and you know it. If you didn't know it you wouldn't have come back here and tried to make a new start. You would have gone right on hiring your guns."

"You know more about me than I know about myself."

"I probably do," she said. "Women are funny that way." She turned toward him suddenly and put her hand on his arm. "I believe in my dad, Johnny," she said, "just the way you believed in your mother. Does that make sense?"

"It doesn't excuse either one of them for the mistakes they made," he said, and he realized that he had never been this close to criticising his mother before.

"But you had to keep giving her a chance, hoping that the next time would be the right time."

"It never was."

"But it could have been. Her marriage was unhappy—everything was against her."

"You never knew her."

"Ma Conway did," she said. "I've talked to Ma about her by the hour."

"Morbid curiosity?"

"That wasn't very nice."

"I'm sorry."

"I wanted to know about her because I felt she was a lot like dad. She was on the wrong road but she wanted to make the right turn someplace. I can understand why you loved her and stuck with her, Johnny."

And she would have understood you,

he found himself admitting. You're a lot alike. "I hope for your sake you aren't making a mistake," he said gruffly.

"I'm not," she said. "I wouldn't amount to much if I didn't trust him and give him a chance, would I?" He felt her fingers digging into his arm. "It takes time and patience, Johnny. You proved that to yourself."

"Suppose you're wrong?"

Her voice was suddenly tight. "I'd kill him rather than see him suffer a scandal."

"What scandal?" he said. "They all cover up for each other."

"Not this time, Johnny," she said. "I'd expose him myself. I told him so."

He glanced at her quickly and saw the firm line of her jaw, the flare of her nostrils. It was like looking at someone he had never known. He had always thought of her as a convention defying girl, prettier than most, depending on her good looks to keep her out of serious trouble, spending money and not caring where it came from. He saw instead a girl who thought deeply and felt deeply. He said, "You better get some sleep, Betty. There won't be any sleeping after we get the herd moving."

"I'll be in Ponca when you get there," she said. "I'll have all the answers."

"I'll be hoping they're the right answers, Betty," he said.

She turned toward him suddenly and tilted her face up. He could see her lips, moist, inviting. "Thanks for that, Johnny." He started to walk away and she called to him. "Johnny?"

"What?"

"Will you kiss me good-bye?"

For a moment he hesitated and then he ducked his head and kissed her lightly on the lips. She stood there, looking up at him, and then the devil was back in her eyes. "Either there's something wrong with me," she said, "or you're not the man I thought you were."

"Maybe that Pitchfork cowboy could do better," he said.

"He can," she said. "Much better." She walked away from him and for a moment he didn't know whether he should go grab her and really kiss her or turn her across his knees and paddle the daylights out of her. He wound up doing neither, but he had a bad time getting to sleep.

THE dawn came early, a thin gray streamer through the saddle of the hills. A ground mist rose and cattle stood in a filmy blanket while men rolled out from under tarps that dripped water. The cook fire flared in the eerie light and voices changed from sleep-deadened grumbles to sharp excitement as men drank their coffee. The cattle, too, sensed the impending mass movement as men circled the herd, calling and snapping rope ends. The thrill of the first morning with a trail herd was heavy on all the men and those who had not smiled before grinned and passed remarks and even Bert Stokes had ceased his whining.

It was three hours before the wedge-shaped herd was strung out of the valley and headed north and in time it shaped into a rough line with every man in the crew riding in the glare of the blood red sun. Throats became parched and tempers short and then suddenly, without any apparent reason, a trail herd was on the move. Johnny Bentley felt it surge into shape and it was an old, familiar feeling. He left Bert Stokes and Texas at point and rode back down the long, now curving line, watching the sun glint on polished horns, smelling the first of the dust that would be part of their life for a month, hearing the music of clicking hocks.

The camp that had been home was a deserted shambles now and Coosie was busy covering his fire, getting ready for the trek to the night's bed ground. "Want

to push 'em hard today and get the goosiness out of 'em," he told the cook. "Wait for us up at Cottonwood." The cook grunted an answer. He would take the road that paralleled the trail for this first day and be ready for the crew at night. Each man had taken biscuits and cold steak in his saddlebags or rolled up in his slicker. They'd eat in the saddle today.

The morning glared into light. The sun took its usual hue and the mist was gone. Johnny hadn't had a chance to see Betty this morning and now he was a little sorry he hadn't. He had found that he couldn't define the feeling he had for her, and that bothered him. He circled the old camp ground, marked by the crumpled grass where men had spread their soogans and by the outline of the rope corral where the remuda had been held. He saw Coosie close up the back of the chuckwagon and climb up to the seat. The horses surged into the harness and the chuckwagon bumped out of its ruts and headed for the road. Johnny rode on back and the noise of the herd floated out to him.

The C Cross-Pitchfork outfit, he saw, was already on the move, the size of the herd making it much more mobile. He stood his ground and waited, knowing that it would be impossible to avoid Gail and Claude's crew all the way to Ponca. Bettencort and one of Gail's riders were at point and Farnsworth was with them. Johnny kept off to one side, not wanting to give the men any excuse for starting even a verbal argument. He heard Farnsworth giving orders and took it from that that Clay was the trailboss. That was a good decision. In spite of Clay's slow wits, he was a top-notch hand, trail-wise and loyal. Maybe I jumped to conclusions, Johnny thought to himself. Maybe there won't be no trouble.

AND there wasn't any trouble. Not for three solid weeks. Weeks in which Johnny saw his own crew grow up. There were a couple of fist fights, and that was all right. There were arguments about shifts, and he put it down with a word, letting the men know who was boss. He saw Gabe Petlin, stringy and taciturn, turn into a working machine of bone and muscle; he saw Bert Stokes grinning for the first time in his life. Cattle were moving north and there was money at the end of the trail. Political appointments and pay-offs seemed like small things in the face of this mighty tide of hoofs and horns moving forward. The men grew trail-wise and the cattle grew trail-wise and they made fifteen miles that last day and bedded on the south bank of the Ramapo. The air was dead and the leaden clouds depressed the horizon.

The voices of the crew carried with startling clearness in the vacuum-like stillness of the approaching storm. A mile upstream from the Bench B the C Cross pool pitched camp and the C Cross cows fouled the water for the big herd below. Johnny Bentley let it pass. The stream would clear and cows had to drink.

The two herds had traveled side by side for four days now, moving steadily, grazing their way along on the broad prairie that stretched as far as the eye could see. There was a splendid loneliness about it that touched all the men and soothed tempers and formed a bond and kinship that couldn't have been built in any other way. The crews kept to themselves and the two herds had been remarkably manageable. Once a couple of Bench B steers had broken and mixed with the C Cross stock. Pinto Fletcher brought them back, and he was a quiet Pinto Fletcher with a quick grin for the Bench B man who thanked him. Johnny Bentley, watching, noticed that Pinto wore no gun, but he remembered another time when Pinto had worn no gun. He had come unarmed on a friendly mission and a man had died with a knife between his shoulder blades.

The silence grew and intensified the loneliness in the men until it became a painful thing, an impending gloom that seeped into them and would not let them rest. The cattle felt it too and they refused to bed. Texas rode by and said, "They're goosie as hell tonight, boss."

"Double the night guard," Johnny said. He felt as jittery as the cattle.

The cloud mass grew heavy and the twilight was gray and thick, neither night nor day. The smell of the dust and the herd was thick and the aroma of sun-cured grass seemed to cover the world. Even the river was still and the darting gnats were gone and the few birds talked in low whispers of nature's signs and the night ahead. A single drop of rain left a dimple in the dust at Johnny's feet. The cook dropped a pan and Johnny whirled on him angrily. "Watch it, damn you!" The cook just stared at him with sullen eyes.

But the lightning flash and the thunder crash that Johnny had dreaded didn't come. It rained instead, an ever increasing tempo of drops the size of bird's eggs, increasing, increasing until now it was a roar of sound, a hissing and then a drone as dust turned to mud. In a half hour everything was soaked and the darkness was complete. Men huddled miserably with saddle blankets around their shoulders and tried to shield their coffee cups with their hands. And two strangers rode out of the night and into the glare of the sputtering fire.

THEY were bearded men, gaunt and saddle-weary, men who wore sheepskin-lined coats and sagging gun belts. They rode in with their right hands raised in greeting and one said, "God, man, is there a chance for a bit of chuck?"

"Get down and swim," Johnny said. "There's plenty."

The two men ate wolfishly, unmindful of the water that streamed down the seams of their cheeks and dropped into their tin plates. One, a man with a chalk eye, sopped his plate with a biscuit and washed the sodden mass down with scalding coffee. They looked like men on the dodge, but they might have been men who just hadn't been able to find work in these tight times. They didn't say and no one asked. When they had finished the chalk eyed one said, "We'll work if you can use a couple of hands."

"Sorry," Johnny said. "We're full up."

"Now wait a minute, Bentley," Bert Stokes said. "Hell's fire, we can use some help—"

"I said we're full up," Johnny said.

The chalk-eyed man was watching Johnny carefully. "Mind if we bed down here for the night? Looked like there was another herd behind you. Might be they could use us."

"Go ahead and bed down," Johnny said. "It's as wet here as anyplace. The herd up-river from us don't need hands either."

"Maybe I'll ask 'em for myself," the chalk-eyed man said.

Johnny shook his head. "I wouldn't."

As he went to get his own bedroll he heard Bert Stokes talking to the strangers. He hesitated a moment, wondering if he should go back and tell the two to keep riding. He knew what they were by their looks; there was a possibility they were spies for a rustling gang ahead, or messengers from Jim Savage. Johnny Bentley had learned a long time back not to take chances.

Whatever decision he might have made was interrupted by the startling cessation of rain. There was a complete silence, and then hell in heaven opened up with one deafening crash of light and sound. There was a bellow from the herd, shouts from the men. For a second the world was alive with blue light and then there was an ear-splitting crash and a ball of flame as lightning struck between the

camp and the herd. The bellow of fear-maddened longhorns drowned out the thunder of the rain that cascaded down from the ruptured sky. The whole thing was a nightmare.

Up the river the C Cross herd thundered into life and started their mad run and in subsequent lightning flashes Johnny saw that the two herds were headed directly toward each other. Horses screamed and men cursed as they hit wet saddles and lit out on the edge of the hopeless tangle as the two herds met, paused and then struck out together across the level plain.

IT WAS like riding into the current of a river. The rain came down in solid walls of water. Horses slipped and fell and the bawl of the herd was one long wail of sound reaching into the night. Johnny's first thought was of Gail, and he rode into the C Cross camp where everything was pandemonium. He caught a glimpse of Claude, face dead white, in a lightning flash, and he saw Claude pointing toward the river. A horse was swimming across and he knew that Gail was clinging to the saddle-horn. He turned his mount and fell in alongside Claude and the two of them rode stirrup to stirrup toward the swirling mass of hoofs and horns.

There was no chance for conversation and the men worked by sheer instinct as they were driven along with the tide of cattle. They found Clay Farnsworth and the big foreman's face was streaked with blood from a fall he had taken. His clothes were solid mud and he looked as if he might be hurt, but he was still in there, doing what he could. He rode away from them, up to a ridge, directly in the path of the charging cattle. Two men joined him and Johnny knew by his build alone that one of them was Curt Bettencort. There was a flash of flame and the report of the gun was lost in the welter of sound. Another gun and then another. The men were firing, trying to stem the stampede. Johnny looked at Claude and his brother's heavy face was white and drawn.

Everything stopped at once—the rain, the thunder and the stampede. The silence was a deafening thing, broken finally by the bawling of the cattle and the shouting of the men. And suddenly Johnny knew it wasn't the shouting of men rounding up cattle. There was a hysterical sound to it—a sound of fear and anger and even terror. He and Claude spurred their horses and rode to the top of the hill. Suddenly Johnny knew what they'd find when they reached the top.

Farnsworth's trampled body lay half submerged in mud, and three of Claude's regular hands stood around him. A little beyond Farnsworth another man lay sprawled, face down, and beyond him another. Neither of the last two bodies had been touched by the stampede. Johnny dismounted and dropped to his knees beside the mangled body of Clay Farnsworth. A match flared in his hand, was held a moment and then died out. He stood up and met the eyes of his brother. "I saw it," Claude said. He looked as if he were going to be sick. There was a bullet hole in the back of Farnsworth's head, and the other two bodies, Johnny knew, would have the same mark of treachery.

"You aim to blame this on my crew?" Johnny said softly. "You figure it was our fault?"

"No more need of that," a voice behind them said. "We'll take over from here on in." They turned and saw Curt Bettencort, the two Hannifers, Pinto Fletcher and the two strangers standing there. Each man had a cocked gun in his hand. Curt Bettencort was grinning broadly. "Looks like it's time for you to make up your mind just who you're working for, Bentley," he said.

THE first thought that struck Johnny Bentley was that if the crew had followed Claude's orders, none of Claude's or Gail's men were armed. Claude must have been thinking that too when he had first heard those shots up here on the hill. Johnny glanced at Claude and could see only an outline of his face in the darkness—a stubborn chin, tilted up, a pale glitter of his eye.

Here on this barren rise of land, Johnny Bentley thought, would the destinies of two fighting families at last be thrown into the showdown pot. And it looked as though all the sacrifice and hardship offered to the gods of war amounted to

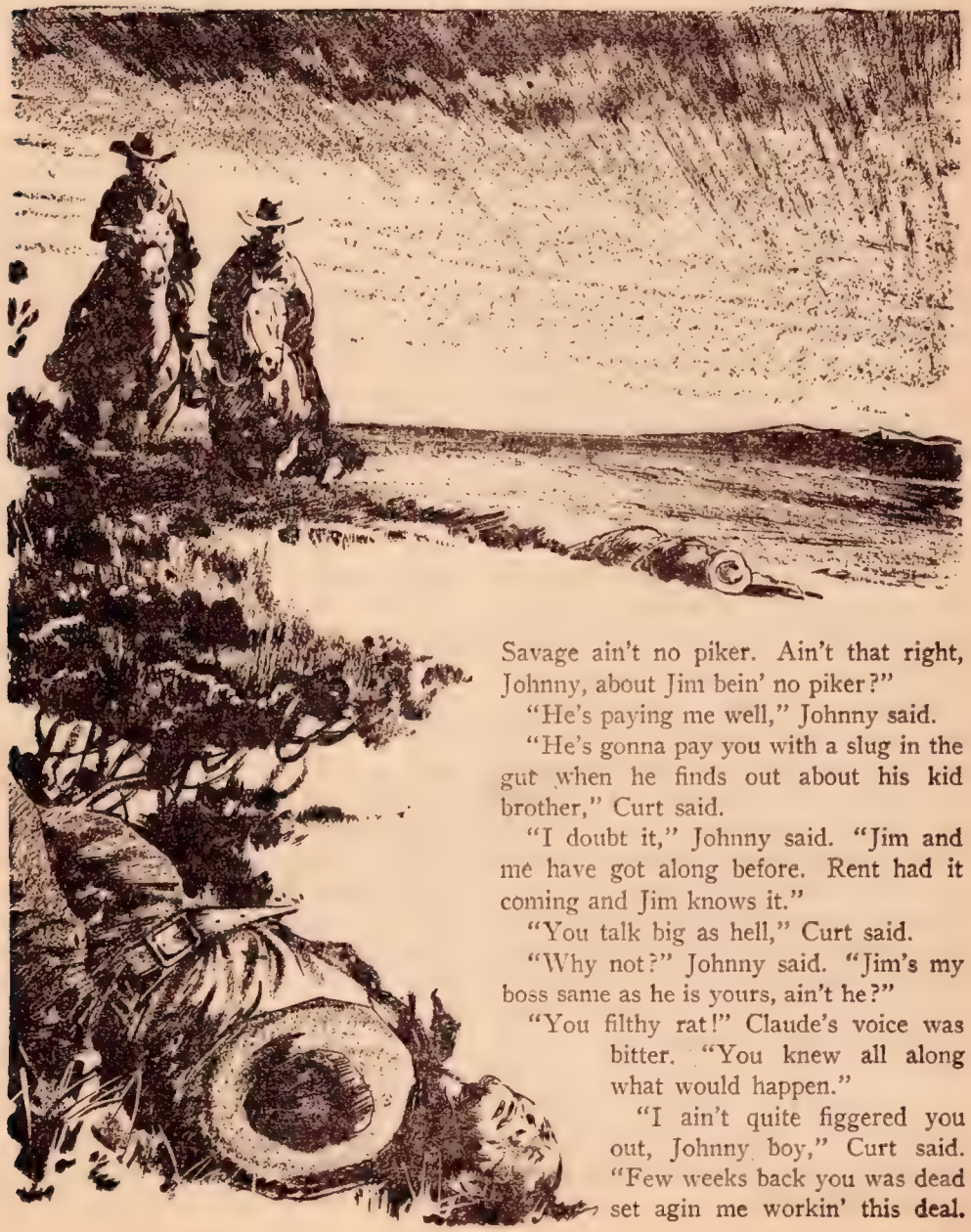
They found him there, holding his brother in his arms

nothing. But the cards must be played.

The gun in Bettencort's hand blasted and one of the C Cross punchers spun around as if he had been hit with a club. There was a chilled silence. "Anybody that wants to behave themselves can have a job driving this herd on for delivery to Jim Savage," Curt said. "Otherwise you can stay here with a bullet in your gut. How about it, Buster?" He punched his gun again the chest of one of Claude's regular hands.

"God, I won't give you no trouble," the puncher said. "I don't give a damn who I work for, just so I get paid."

"You'll get paid," Curt said. "Jim Savage ain't no piker. Ain't that right, Johnny, about Jim bein' no piker?"



"He's paying me well," Johnny said.

"He's gonna pay you with a slug in the gut when he finds out about his kid brother," Curt said.

"I doubt it," Johnny said. "Jim and me have got along before. Rent had it coming and Jim knows it."

"You talk big as hell," Curt said.

"Why not?" Johnny said. "Jim's my boss same as he is yours, ain't he?"

"You filthy rat!" Claude's voice was bitter. "You knew all along what would happen."

"I ain't quite figgered you out, Johnny boy," Curt said. "Few weeks back you was dead set agin me workin' this deal.

Now you act friendly as hell. You wouldn't be tryin' to save your hide, now would you, Johnny boy?"

"If I had a gun I'd kill you first, Johnny," Claude Bentley said. His words had been intended only for Johnny, but they carried to the others.

"Now that's an interesting thought," Curt Bettencort said. "Ain't it interesting, Pinto?"

"I wonder if he'd do it?" Pinto Fletcher said.

"Give me a gun and I'll show you," Claude Bentley said.

"Claude, don't be a fool!" Johnny's voice was sharp. He saw Pinto step forward, a gun outstretched, butt first. He knew that if Claude ever reached for that gun Pinto would spin it and shoot him through the heart. He had seen Pinto pull this one before. He saw Claude reach for the gun and then Johnny swung. The entire weight of his body was behind the blow and it felt as if he had broken Claude's jaw. Claude went down and Johnny was on top of him and the gun blasted, inches from his face.

He knew the slug had missed him and torn into Claude's body. He rolled, tugging his own weapon free, and he fired straight up. The bullet caught Pinto Fletcher in the center of the face and as the outlaw fell, a knife slid out of his sleeve. There was a curse from Curt Bettencort, a scream from one of the Hannifers and a dozen guns were blazing. Johnny started rolling in the mud; bullets sprayed around him. There was a crazy blur of muzzle flashes, shadows moving in the darkness, a pound of horses' hoofs. And the cattle, still crazy from their running, broke again, the massed herds sweeping straight up the hill. Johnny heard the drum of their hoofs and then he was on his feet, running. He just had time to throw himself across the body of his brother when the first of the stampede broke around him.

IT SEEMED like hours that he lay there, trying to protect Claude's body, while hoofs beat close to his face and the hot smell of cattle was sickening. The earth was trembling with the shock of the running beasts and the air was stifling with their stink. He felt Claude's blood soaking through his own shirt and a crazy thought kept drumming through his mind: Your blood and my blood. It's one and the same. He heard gunshots again, a hundred yards or more away now, and in time the insane thunder was gone.

He was mud and dung-splattered when he dragged himself to his feet. A dirty dawn was showing the patches of sky between the scudding clouds and a fresh breeze was blowing off the river. Quickly his hands explored for Claude's pulse and found it, weak, unsteady. The wound was high in Claude's chest and the bullet had torn out through the shoulder. The light grew brighter and Claude's blood was black against his white skin. "Get some of that air, fellow," Johnny said, trying to prop his brother up. He scooped water from a filthy bog hole and sloshed it against Claude's face.

Later, when he could see around him, he spotted the bodies of seven men. Clay Farnsworth and the two Pitchfork men, whose only crime had been in trying to be loyal to their brands. Pinto Fletcher—one of the Hannifers. And off to one side the chalk-eyed stranger, his bad eye staring unblinking at the rising sun. There was a horrible sickness in Johnny Bentley and he thought of his own past and how in a way it had led to this. He heard Claude's moan and he looked into the white face of his brother, a man who had stuck by his convictions. And he thought of Betty Mallory and of how she had said there must be a middle road that a man who had seen both sides could take.

Bert Stokes, Gabe Petlin and Texas found him there, holding his brother in his arms, talking softly, the way a man

talks to a new-born child that is his own and still is a stranger. "Gail?" Johnny said.

"She's all right," Petlin said in his dry, tense voice. "Made it across the river. Here, I'll give you a hand. Coosie is comin' up with the wagon. One of them strangers that come to camp last night is cashin' in fast. He's doin' a lot of talkin'."

"I told you to whistle if you needed a hand-up, damn you," Texas said. "I come up on them yahoos coverin' you with guns and I didn't hear you whistle a-tall, so I just took things on myself."

"Thanks, Texas."

"Better thank Gabe and Bert here, too. They was with me."

"Be careful with my brother," Johnny said. He turned and looked toward the river, and then he saw Gabe and Bert watching him, their eyes accusing. "Think what you want," he said. He walked down the hill and the men followed him with their eyes.

Senator Mallory

He found the dying outlaw down by the swollen river, his head propped against a saddle. Gail, white-faced, her clothing soaked from the river crossing, was there. The dying man was nearly gone, a horrible wound in his chest spouting blood, his mouth working spasmodically. He looked at Johnny and tried to speak, but there were no words. "Senator Mallory and Jim Savage had this all planned," Gail said. Her voice was toneless. "Petlin and Stokes weren't going to get anything for their herds. The senator and Savage were going to make a wholesale steal and after they found out Claude and I wouldn't pool with them they sent these men to rustle the entire herd."

Her voice broke. "Why am I telling you this, Johnny? You must have known the set-up." Behind her the outlaw was trying to sit up. He slumped forward and one of the men spread a saddle blanket across his face. Johnny looked at the men and they turned away from him and he knew Gail was telling the truth. She was merely repeating what this dying outlaw had told her.

He thought of Betty and there was nothing left to believe in. He looked at Gail and said, "Claude's in the wagon, Gail. He needs you."

NO ONE in the camp tried to stop him, but they cursed him with their eyes and condemned him in letting him go. Later when he had saddled a fresh mount he went over to where the men had erected a lean-to tent out of a tarp. Claude was in blankets and Gail was sitting by him, stroking his forehead. Johnny stood there looking down at them and he said, "He'll be all right, Gail. He's been all right from the first."

She looked up at him and there was confusion in every line of her face. "Johnny." He turned away from her and as he rode north toward Ponca he knew that one chapter of his life had closed. And perhaps a chapter of Claude's

life had closed, too, and he realized suddenly that a new book was opening for both of them.

He knew that Gabe Petlin would take over the bossing of the herd and he knew that Claude's determination would bring it through. It was Johnny's job now to see that the herd could be sold when it reached Ponca. He had watched the fight cement C Cross, Pitchfork and Bench B hands into a solid unit and now they would go on together and make the decisions that would be best for all concerned.

For the first time he thought of the future, of other herds like these moving north to supply beef to the government and he saw clearly now what it was Claude and Gail had fought for. There was no compromising with graft. He and Betty had both been wrong to think there could be. That was the thing a man had to learn, he realized. There was no middle road. "You were wrong, Betty," he said to himself, "and I'm sorry you were wrong." He rode steadily north, toward Ponca.

There was no doubt in his mind that Curt Bettencort and the remaining Hannifer brother had ridden straight back to Jim Savage to report their failure in taking over the herd. He picked up the trail a few miles out of camp and followed it like a relentless shadow, stopping only to catch a few hours sleep, then pushing on without eating. He had no idea how many men Jim Savage had at his beck and call, and it didn't seem to matter. He knew now that Jim Savage was up to his favorite trick—the complete double-cross—and the senator was no better than Jim Savage. Johnny made a horse trade with a sod-busting farmer and now he was a short day from Ponca. . . .

He dismounted in front of a substantial looking saloon, legal here since the actual reservation boundary was a good twenty miles to the north. He felt the tiredness as he loosened the bay's cinch and looped the reins around the hitching rail and when he walked up on the porch with its board awning his feet felt as if they were still in stirrups. It was a familiar feeling, the let-down at the end of the trail, and for a second he realized that this was perhaps the end of his own trail, too. He let his gun belt out two notches and pushed through the doors.

A girl came and took his arm and laughed up at him. "Howdy, cowboy. We heard cows were coming back to Ponca." She winked. "You boys are just as big and handsome as you were in the old days, even under all that dust and whiskers."

He reached down and pinched her cheek, feeling a vagrant flush of pleasure in the touch of the soft flesh. "You're seeing things, girlie," he said. "I ain't been paid yet." He turned toward the bar, ignoring the girl.

The bartender hustled over, wiping the bar with his towel as he came. "You got cow dust in your throat, cowboy?" he said, grinning broadly. "Now what'll it be?"

"Information," Johnny said.

The bartender quit wiping the bar. "Such as?"

"Where can I find Senator Mallory?"

"Alamo Hotel," the bartender said. He turned and went back to more profitable customers.

"Thanks," Johnny said. He pushed his way back through the crowd.

The girl was standing near the door. "You ain't friendly, cowboy," she said.

"There'll be a dozen or more men in town in a couple of days," Johnny said. "They're all friendly and they're about to sell a herd of cows, so they'll all have money in their jeans."

"Is that a promise, cowboy?" she said.

"It's a promise," he said. He pushed through the door and left the girl talking to his back.

THERE were two things he had to do here in Ponca—see Senator Mallory and then Jim Savage, in that order. It had to be in that order, because he wasn't fooling himself about Savage's ability with a gun. Vaguely he knew he wanted to see Betty, too, but he put the thought aside. He would never see her again after his meeting with the senator. A quick wash of loneliness seized him and wouldn't leave.

He walked down the street, his eyes alert for any familiar face, and the sun beat down on him and made him conscious of his filthy clothes and his bearded face. A red-and-white pole caught his eye and he went that way. A shave and a bath would be relaxing and he needed to relax.

The barber was talkative and Johnny was in no mood to listen. The warm lather was soporific and the even scrape of the razor against his wiry beard put a rhythm to his thoughts. It wasn't pleasant to face yourself and realize you had been on the wrong road for a long time, and yet it was something like resting after a long time in the saddle.

It was becoming increasingly easy for him to see why Gail had left him, even easy for him to see why Claude had become the die-hard reformer he had become. And if there had only been a bit of understanding someplace along the line, he thought. My mother and dad could have made a go of it and Claude and I would have grown up together and part of me would have rubbed off on him and part of him would have rubbed off on me.

Immediately the thought struck him that that is the very thing Betty had been trying to give her father. It hadn't worked, but it didn't prove it couldn't.

"All finished," the barber said. He was standing there, his head cocked, holding his cloth before him. He looked like an expectant matador. The small room was redolent of cheap powder.

"Huh?" Johnny said. "Oh, sure. How about a bath? You got a bath tub around here?"

"Yes, sir," the barber said. "Right through that door there."

A half hour later he felt like a new man and with his sense of well-being his convictions were strong again. He would talk to Senator Mallory. He would give the man every chance to come clean, and to Johnny coming clean meant only that the senator would take full responsibility for selling the herds. After that, the complete defeat of the senator would have to be in the hands of Claude. With Jim Savage, it would have to be different. He walked out of the barber shop and came face to face with Pinky Hannifer.

It was like meeting a dead man face to face. Pinky Hannifer and his brother, Stretch, were identical twins. Johnny stopped, his feet wide-spread, his hand hovering over his gun. He saw the color drain from Pinky's face. "Wait a minute, Johnny," Pinky said. "I ain't got no fight with you."

"Who hired you, Pinky?"

"Johnny, damn it—"

"Give me the truth, Pinky." His hand closed on the butt of his gun.

"We was workin' for Jim Savage, same as always."

"Who made the deal with you to rustle the herd?"

"Johnny, I can't—" The gun came out of the holster and jammed against Pinky's stomach. Pinky's eyes protruded and a bead of perspiration formed on his upper lip. "It was Senator Mallory," he said. "The senator was afraid maybe you'd try to double-cross him. We was supposed to get rid of you and your brother and take over."

"Say your prayers, Pinky."

"Please, Johnny. I didn't have nothin' to do with beatin' up that kid. It was Curt did that, Johnny, so help me God. I broke up with Curt, Johnny. I ain't got nothin' to do with none of 'em."

ONCE, Johnny knew, he might have squeezed the trigger. He had never yet killed a man without giving him a chance; he had quit before he had been forced to kill in cold blood. He looked at Pinky, shaking and trembling, and he lowered the gun. "Get out of town, Pinky. Now."

"Sure, Johnny. Sure I will."

Pinky started backing away and when he had backed a half block, his hands out from his sides, he turned and ran. He'd go straight to Savage and tell him Johnny was in town, Johnny knew, but it didn't matter, really. He started walking up the street toward the Alamo Hotel.

The hotel was surprisingly well built, a monument to wealthier days. It was of brick, three stories high, and there was a well-appointed dining room on one side of the lobby, a quiet bar on the other. He asked for Senator Mallory's room and the clerk glanced up and saw the hard face, the tied-down holster. "He expecting you?" he asked nervously.

"Just tell me the room," Johnny said.

The clerk licked his lips. "Well, I'm not sure, sir."

Johnny reached across the desk and gripped the man by the shirt front. He pulled him against the counter, hard. The clerk's eyes bugged out. "Third floor. First door on the right at the head of the stairs."

"Thanks," Johnny said. He released his grip and started up the stairs. He paused on the third floor landing, listening, and he flexed the fingers of his right hand. His rapping on the door made a hollow sound that echoed up and down the corridor. Down at the end of the hall a door opened slightly and then Betty's voice was inviting him in. He felt a quick thrill he hadn't anticipated, followed by a sickening dread.

The elegance of the room surprised him. It was a suite, apparently, with two bedrooms, one on each side of the sitting room he was entering. A Victorian sofa covered with cut blue velure stood in front of a false fireplace and there were two chairs, covered in the same material. A dark Jacobean library table, cluttered with papers, was against one wall and there was an imitation Oriental, trimmed with fringe, on the floor. The velvet and ball fringe drapes, hanging full, were thick and heavy.

Betty was standing in the exact center of the room. "Johnny, I knew you wouldn't walk out on us," she said, and he caught the warning in her voice. The drapes moved and a man with a gun was standing there. It had been a long time since Johnny had seen Jim Savage.

"Don't try to cover up for him any more, honey," Savage said. "Last night you were telling me how much you loved me and all the time you were covering up for this—" He smiled, a tall, handsome man with blonde, wavy hair, a deep cleft in his chin. His eyes were frosty blue, his teeth even and white. "Hello, Johnny Bentley," he said.

Betty threw herself on Jim Savage and he pushed her back, roughly. "Jim, listen, please!" she pleaded. "Johnny didn't have anything to do with it! He was just driving as trailboss, that's all. He doesn't care about any deal you and dad have."

"There are a few other things," Savage said, "even if that were true." His thumb hooked back the hammer of the gun.

"You said it was Rent's own fault. You said you couldn't hold it against Johnny for protecting himself."

"It was moonlight that night, sweetheart," he said. "You're a very nice thing in the moonlight. I was saying what you wanted to hear."

"Stand back, Betty," Johnny said softley.

"Yes, do that," Savage said. "I wouldn't want you to get blood on your dress."

"Johnny, please! Reason with him!

Tell him you don't care what they do with the herd."

"TURN around, Jim." The voice was soft, modulated, a very tired voice. Johnny's eyes shifted ever so slightly and he saw the senator standing in the doorway to the bedroom. The senator was wearing his old dressing gown with the silk-faced lapels. There was a cigar in his mouth, a derringer in his hand. The smile faded from Savage's lips.

"What the hell's the idea?"

"It's no good, Jim," the senator said. "We kill Bentley and there'll be another one like him. When our stink gets so big that gunmen like Bentley can smell it, it's too big."

"We had it all figured out, you fool!" Savage said, and now there was the first touch of panic in his voice. "We'll make a million dollars."

"They'll keep on coming, Jim," the senator said softly. "That's the way it is in this country. The people will take so much and no more. They'll keep coming and finally they'll get us and everyone like us. I don't mind for myself, but we're not going to let Betty see it."

"Dad! Look out!" The girl's voice was a high-pitched scream that disappeared in the blasting roar of Jim Savage's gun. The senator smashed back through the doorway and Savage was turning, crouched, his gun blazing. Bentley fired once and he saw Savage go down. The door behind him crashed open and he whirled and fired. His aim was bad and Curt Bettencort was half way across the room. The report of Johnny Bentley's next shot was muffled by the fabric of Bettencort's shirt.

The powdersmoke cleared from the room and the echoes of the shots died and now there were shouts and voices and feet pounding on the stairs. Johnny walked into the bedroom and found Betty on her knees at the side of her father. One glance was enough to tell Johnny that the senator was dying. Betty was smoothing his hair and she was crying and the senator was trying to smile.

"I was just no good, Betty," the senator said. "I lied to you. I never had any intentions of going straight." His breathing was becoming labored and there was a fleck of blood on his lips. "You either got to be right or you got to be wrong. There's no middle road and a lot of politicians in Washington are going to find it out."

"Dad, you could have changed. If you had only tried once more. . . ."

"There was only one thing wrong with me, Betty," the senator said. "You can lie to people and get away with it, but when you start lying to yourself, you're through. I wasn't honest with myself, Betty." His head slumped forward and Johnny Bentley left the room, leaving Betty Mallory alone with her grief.

* * *

He answered questions in a dead monotone and he spent two hours down at the jail while the marshal tried to decide whether or not there was any charge to be made. A dozen men went out to round up Pinky Hannifer and when they brought him in he told the whole sordid story, his words spilling out in his haste to ingratiate himself with the authorities.

"I guess that clears you, Bentley," the marshal said.

After that Johnny wandered around the town, broke, alone, and he kept hearing the words of Senator Mallory: "I wasn't honest with myself." And that had been the trouble with Johnny Bentley, Johnny decided. He had supported his mother and lived life her way, even when he knew she was wrong. He had hired his guns because he said it didn't matter which side of a range war won, and again he had been lying to himself. That was

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the real weakness Gail had found and hated in him. And he had wanted to make up with Claude, too, when he had come back home, but he had discovered that Gail and Claude were in love and he had fought against it, even while he knew Gail and Claude were right for each other. "I was never honest with myself. . . ."

He slept in the hay at the livery stable that night and he went without his breakfast so that he would have money enough to buy a small imitation wreath for the senator's grave. The funeral was barely over when the dust of the trail herd spread a pall across the sun at the edge of town.

HE AVOIDED Claude and Gail as long as he could, and then when it was nearly time for him to leave town he rode by their camp. Claude was propped up in a chair, his chest bandaged, and the color had returned to his cheeks.

Johnny offered his hand. "I was wrong, Claude," he said. "Good luck to you. You'll make a damn good senator." He walked away and he had started to mount before he realized Gail was there by him.

She looked up at him and her eyes were dry. "Johnny, if you want to start over—"

This was the thing he had wanted. He had come back to get her to re-marry him and nothing else had mattered. He started to take her in his arms and then he thought of the long years ahead and of how the past would come up and he thought of all of Gail's ambitions for Claude. A small voice said, Be honest with yourself, Johnny Bentley, and he knew it was no good. He looked at her and grinned. "Your halo's on crooked today, Gail," he said. "Take good care of Claude." He saw the tears start in her eyes and he turned away, a burning in his throat. She was still standing there when he swung into the saddle and rode back to town.

He rode out by the pens to say goodbye to the crew that was working the herd and he found Betty there, talking to Gabe Petlin. He didn't look at her. "Soon as you're through, Gabe," he said.

Betty forced him to meet her eyes. Her lips were set, her face serious. "You had a contract," she said. "I expect to pay you what's due you."

"All right," he said.

Gabe Petlin walked away, clearing his throat.

"We were both wrong, Johnny," she said. "When I found out dad was in this rotten mess so deeply I wanted to kill him. I tried to do it."

"You don't have to talk about it."

"I do have to talk about it, Johnny, because you're the only one who understands. He was my father, regardless of what he did." There was an intenseness in her voice and he knew she wanted him to say he believed her. "All I could think of was trying to save him, hoping he'd go straight. I thought if I could just give him the understanding he needed—"

And it could be worked, Bentley thought. With two people who have seen the other side of the fence . . . if they'd get together and understand each other. . . . He had dismounted and he was standing there in front of her and he saw her eyes searching his face, hopefully. He tried to smile. "It's been good knowing you, Betty," he said.

"What will you do?"

"Go back and pay my bills first," he said. "Then. . . ." He shrugged. "Ride. Start over someplace."

"Let's start over together, Johnny."

He felt a stinging surge of emotion that nearly choked him. Here was a girl who knew his problems and understood what he was up against. She would know that a man couldn't change his life in a minute. He fought for words and then shook his head. "You wouldn't like it."

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"You wouldn't."

"I'll sell the ranch and with the money from this herd we could get a good start."

"No."

She looked at him and perhaps she was reading his innermost thoughts, for a hint of the old liveliness was creeping back into her dark eyes. She came and laid a hand on his arm and looked up at him, her eyes frankly inviting now. "Johnny, be honest with yourself. You know you want me—"

"Betty, for gosh sakes—"

"You wouldn't want me to marry that young Pitchfork cowboy just because he kisses better than you do, would you?"

"Look, will you leave me alone? I'm poison!"

"So am I, darling," she said. She leaned against him.

"By God!" he said. His arms went around her roughly. Her head tilted back and her lips came up to meet his. The world spun slowly and turned black and then out of the darkness there came whistles and cat-calls and stamping of boots. Johnny raised his eyes and a dozen men were standing around them, grinning and hooting. Johnny sighed and kissed her again. "Now, damn it," he said, "look what you've went and done. I've got to marry you now to make a respectable woman out of you."

"But not too respectable, Johnny darling," she said. "That wouldn't be any fun!"

THE END

(Continued from page 75)

where Indian Joe was turning back.

Roaring Bill Quinn galloped toward the fire, shouting, "Two-three of them rode south! Let's go after them!"

"Stay here!" Donnigan ordered as Roaring Bill came up. "Jigger is down. I'm wounded. We'll be lucky if they don't come back and wipe us out! See about Jigger. He's over there by his horse."

Donnigan limped to the spot after Roaring Bill. Jigger was lying on the ground, breathing heavily. He was shot through the chest.

"Boys, I reckon I'm done for," Jigger gasped weakly.

"You'll come out of it all right," Donnigan encouraged, bending over him. But he lied. Jigger didn't have a chance.

"I rode by that wagon over there," Roaring Bill said. "It's full of water barrels. There's a couple o' water troughs tied to the side. They been gettin' small bunches o' cattle across this dry stretch by hauling water in from the other side."

A moment later Jigger was forgotten as a mass of riders poured down into the flat from the direction of Tumbleweed Mountain. Roaring Bill grated, "It's Brady an' his men! Here's where I do some killin' before they get me!"

"Take it easy!" Donnigan said, pulling down the rifle Roaring Bill had lifted.

The sky had brightened enough to show Shattuck Brady leading the men. No shots were fired as they rode up. Shattuck Brady threw himself off the horse. Behind the riders Donnigan saw Lia.

"What's come off here?" Shattuck Brady demanded harshly as he stared about him with a scowl. "We heard the shootin' back there."

"Your cattle just stampeded out of the flat here," Donnigan answered coldly. "Some of the men who bushwhacked your riders are there on the ground. Several

(Please turn to page 126)

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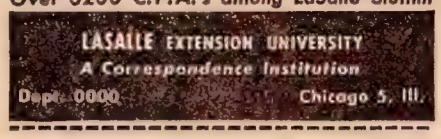

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(Continued from page 125)

more rode south. They've been running Bitter Valley cattle through here on water they hauled from the other end. Creed was mixed up in it. I reckon that's why he wanted to keep Squaw Canyon clear. To be sure of that he had to get me out of the way. If any of the men we shot down can talk, you'll probably get something out of them. Tell them Creed got caught and talked."

"Boys, look around an' see what you can find out!" Brady barked at his men. "Donnigan, what are you doin' here fighting for my cattle?"

"Damn you and your cattle!" said Donnigan thickly, standing on spread legs with blood soaking his shoulder. "I tackled the job to get peace at my ranch."

Some distance away one of Brady's men shouted for him. Shattuck Brady turned on his heel without a word and strode there. Lia's face was pale and tired as she came to Donnigan's side.

"Matt, I told them where you'd gone, after I made dad promise to keep his head when he caught up with you. He wouldn't believe you were following his cattle. Oh—your shoulder!"

"Honey," said Donnigan, with his good arm around her, "it isn't my shoulder that's worryin' me right now. It's my heart. You shouldn't be here."

"Try to keep me away from you!" Lia said.

Shattuck Brady strode back toward them. His manner was strangely different. "Donnigan—it was Creed. That fellow over there talked. This has been going on for years. Maybe there's been a mistake about you for a long time."

"There's one mistake that's not going on any longer," Lia said firmly. "Matt and I are going to be married, quick!"

"Who's stopping you?" Shattuck Brady, growled at his daughter.

THE END

A LETTER FROM THE MARSHAL

(Continued from page 53)

hand tightened. Quietly, the marshal said, "Doctor."

The gambler halted. The smile was gone. The marshal leaned against the bar, watching the crowd. Men had edged nearer, staring at the gambler. They didn't look pleased. The marshal said, "Some towns are tough, Doctor. In Dodge City they nearly hung a crooked dealer."

They could hear the gambler breathing; carefully, he remade that calm grin. "You're an honest man, Marshal. But I still like you."

That was all. He counted out the money. Mingo folded it away. The man in the black coat kept smiling. "He'd like to wear a star, Marshal. You two ought to get in touch."

The marshal did not laugh. Neither did Mingo.

"Yeah," he said. "Someday."

Once, pushing through the doors, he looked back. The marshal lounged quiet by the bar, still watching him.

* * *

Wagons were pulling out; the "Hep" and "Haw" of drivers rolled through dusty morning sunlight. Teams struck west for the silver hills. Shaw's arm was in a sling but, sober now, he climbed the buckboard. Mingo flipped the lines and eased off the brake. Then the colored hotel-porter came running, waving the white envelope. "Law gen'mun say deliver this, Cap'n. Just 'fore he rid out."

Mingo frowned. Shaw watched him break the seal and read. Mingo paled.

Sir: I learned one thing in Dodge City. A new officer needs deputies he can depend on. Deputies like the kid that hollered, "Cheat!" and stood pat to swap lead with Doc Holliday. Like the doctor said: Get in touch.

Obdntly Yrs, Wyatt Earp
U. S. Marshal, Tombstone

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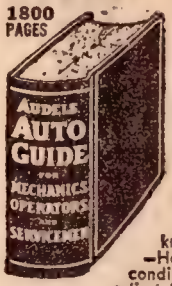

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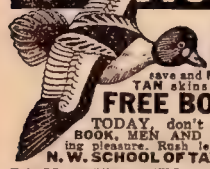

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CHECK THEM GOLD TOWN BOOKS!

By BOB YOUNG

EDUCATION or fine social breeding was certainly no prerequisite for grubbing gold in California during the boom days. It wasn't even necessary for a man to know writin' or figgerin' if he sold miners' supplies in the many stores dotting the ledge of the Mother Lode. Take for example, the accounting systems of Irishman Donnelly and Italian Nervi.

Donnelly kept a store in Columbia, California, and he couldn't read or write. Naturally he wanted to keep track of the money he took in so for each dollar received he placed a toothpick in a tumbler, and took one away when he made an expenditure. Toothpicks in the glasses grew alarmingly small, and Donnelly was worried although his money seemed to be increasing. Finally he found that some of the customers were picking their teeth with his accounts. He changed the markers to dried beans and it is recorded he had fifty thousand when he sold out.

But for accuracy in keeping stock was the system of Joaquin de Lucca, a resident of Italian Bar until his death at the age of ninety-four. Despite his imposing name, he was always called Nervi.

Nervi devised his own set of hieroglyphics—word pictures. For the purchase of a cheese he would inscribe a circle on the customers' page. If a saw was bought a likeness was drawn, or a grindstone was a circle with a small hole in the center. A wedge was a wedge, and a gold pan was also two circles, but with just the rim outlined.

The customers were also described in pictures. Tall men would be drawn in thin vertical lines; a fat one with a broad swash of the pencil. And to each was

relegated a distinctive mark. If brothers carried accounts at Nervi's store then he would mark them with the same general mark but give further delineation.

Getting back to the purchases, with the cheese sales, and others he would mark long lines indicating ten cents; half lines would be a nickel. Other denominations were drawn appropriately.

One miner, with some Eastern book-larning, thought he was smarter than the ignorant Nervi and his bookkeeping pictures. He refused to pay his bill, and Nervi sued. Witnesses at the trial testified that they had never known him to make a mistake either in identification or goods purchased. The smart one paid his bill as the court ordered.

Thirty-five miners once decided to put Nervi's system to the supreme test. They all went in and ordered items that he would have to order from nearby Columbia, rather than just picking them off his shelf. He filled every order without a mistake.

Horatio Cross and Sylvanus Pitts once proved that the system could fail though. When they came to pay their bill after charging supplies for a month, Cross and Pitts found that he had charged them for a cheese. They know they hadn't bought a cheese.

Said Pitts, "Nervi, you've made a mistake. We never bought a cheese from you. We don't even like cheese."

Nervi at once pointed to the circle on their page.

"You must have bought one," he sputtered. "I have a cheese drawn here."

Back and forth the argument went until Cross remembered they had charged a grindstone during the past month.

Nervi's face brightened immediately.

"Santa Maria," he said, "I forgot the hole in the circle."

The account was settled forthwith.

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(Continued from page 7)

crooked sheriff of Dolores County, who planted that wore-out paint horse on Effie and Bud Randall. Now get your keys and turn Bud loose. He's been locked up long enough for something he didn't do."

"Yes, yes, of course." Buck is still rattled. "But you? There's a sizeable reward for the return of this money. Who does it go to? Who killed the Childers brothers?"

I grin at him. "You'll be real surprised, Sheriff. Tensleep done that heavy work; you know, Tensleep Maxon! He sent his regards an' this cash. He was working for the Randalls at the time and he'll want you to do right by them young folks, to see that the reward helps them get started with their silver mine. He'd hate to come back and pay you a visit, an' won't unless you cross this deal up."

"Tensleep!" the lawman mutters, sorta stunned. "Well for gosh sakes!"

I take the gal's hand. "Good-bye, Miss Effie. Nice to have met you an' sometime I'm coming back to see you."

"Oh, I hope so." She presses my hand, fervent. "Good-bye and—and good luck wherever you go."

"Thanks, an' the same to you." I leave the room an' as I close the door I hear the sheriff say, "There goes a queer talkin' gazabo, Miss Effie. Who do you suppose he was?"

"Oh," says the gal, with a song in her words, "that's Tumbleweed Jones, from Montana. One of the finest gentlemen I've ever met. I hope. . . ."

The closing door shuts out what she hopes, which is just as well for me, I reckon, an' for my peace of mind. Heron is whickerin' for me, an' the long, long road reaches ahead . . . to where? *Quien sabe, Dios sabe!* Comin', boy. Comin' on the double!

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1 Hibernator or migrator?

2 Native or stranger?

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3 Lasting headdress or latest style?

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